FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS
FEI TIAN YE XIANG
Joyful
REUNION
BOOK TWO

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HANGU PASS
JIANMEN PASS
JIANG PREFECTURAL CITY
YANGTZE RIVER
MT. WENZHONG
MT. YUHENG
XICHUAN
SOUTHERN CHEN

Joyful
REUNION
BOOK TWO
相見歡
WRITTEN BY
非天夜翔
FEI TIAN YE XIANG
(ARISE ZHANG)
ILLUSTRATED BY
PORRIDGE
RUTHIE (KKCOOCOOL)
TRANSLATED BY
MIMI, SUIKA, AND YUNYUN
Seven Seas
Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Mimi, Suika, yunyun
ADAPTATION: Lee Mandelo
INTERIOR, LOGO, AND COVER DESIGN: M. A. Lewife
COPY EDITOR: Jehanne Bell
PROOFREADER: Ami Leh, Hnä, Foxghost
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Clay Gardner
EDITOR: Kelly Quinn Chiu
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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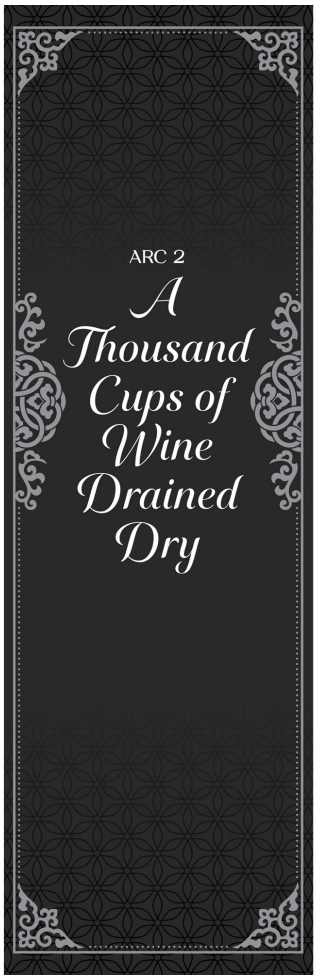
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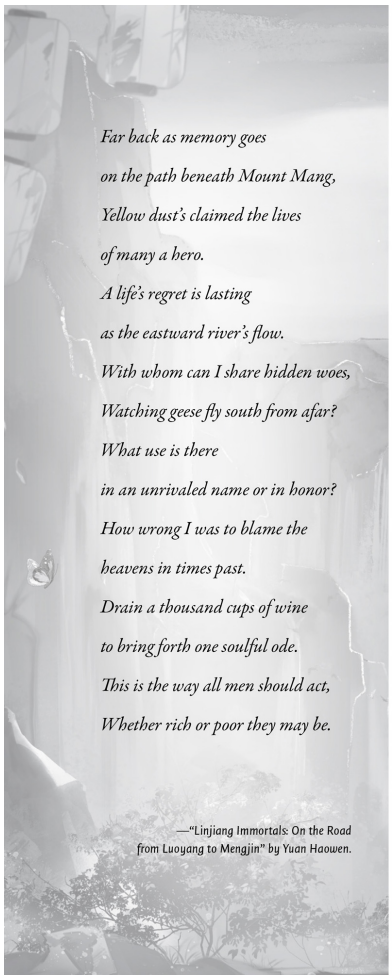
A Thousand Cups of Wine Drained Dry



Far back as memory goes
on the path beneath Mount Mang,
Yellow dust's claimed the lives
of many a hero.
A life's regret is lasting
as the eastward river's flow.
With whom can I share hidden woes,
Watching geese fly south from afar?
What use is there
in an unrivaled name or in honor?
How wrong I was to blame the
heavens in times past.
Drain a thousand cups of wine
to bring forth one soulful ode.
This is the way all men should act,
Whether rich or poor they may be.

—"Linjiang Immortals: On the Road from Luoyang to Mengjin" by Yuan Haowen.

Chapter 38

ON THE SEVENTH DAY of the seventh month, the Yuan army breached the walls of Shangjing and massacred tens of thousands inside the city.

On the seventh day of the seventh month, the Han and Khitan reinforcements arrived and engaged Ögedei's army in a heated battle within the city walls. The loss of their general Li Jianhong forced the Southern Chen army into a temporary retreat, but the Khitan he had led there were aflame with determination to defeat the Mongols—or at least go down with them. With only their bodies as their shields, they swarmed Shangjing. Southern Chen's army retrieved their general's body the following day, and forty thousand grief-ridden soldiers charged back into the fray.

Not an inch of Shangjing was unmarred by battle, the entire city nearly razed to the ground. Two hundred thousand civilians met their ends—if not under a rain of arrows, then on the blades of the Mongol soldiers.

Two days after the Mongols entered the city, the Liao reinforcements from Zhongjing finally arrived. After suffering a great loss to these fresh forces, the Yuan army retreated toward the vast wilderness in the north. The Khitan soldiers, mad with bloodlust, chased the fleeing soldiers eighty li from Shangjing to the Bailu Plains, where Ögedei regrouped and launched a fierce counterattack. The battle's aftermath was bloody beyond imagining; corpses littered the wide plain.

The push and pull between the two forces persisted for half a month, the conflict stretching from Shangjing to the western Xianbei Mountains. Cities burned, and nine out of ten families in the north were forced to flee from their homes.

On the night of the Qixi Festival, when Shangjing had fallen into enemy hands, the people of Qionghua House had escaped through an underground passage with Duan Ling in the lead, breathing heavily as he carried an injured courtesan.

"Your Highness—you mustn't, with your injuries…"

“Forget the courtesies right now!” Duan Ling said.

He was drenched in blood, though whether from his own injuries or those of the girl on his back, it was impossible to say. As they approached the exit of the underground passage with dawn nearing, thuds sounded on the wooden board overhead.

Footsteps. Then more footsteps, followed by the twangs of bowstrings snapping and grisly shrieks. Everyone looked up uneasily. Early sunlight peeked through the cracks in the board and shone on the blood pooling on the ground before them.

Xunchun pointed up, and Duan Ling waved a hand, mouthing *Mongols.*

He waited until the sounds of soldiers had faded to lift the wooden hatch and climb out.

In the pale glow of dawn, the corpses of Chen soldiers covered the ground; fires burned in the buildings all around them. Duan Ling lowered the injured girl he carried to the ground, then held a finger under her nose to feel for breath.

At some point, she had passed away.

“She’s gone,” Xunchun said.

“What was her name?” asked Duan Ling.

“Qiu Jin,” Xunchun said. “We must keep moving.”

Duan Ling laid down the girl’s delicate body. A Mongol soldier had slashed a foot-long wound across Qiu Jin’s shoulder blade, and she’d endured the agony with eyes squeezed shut and face drained of color. Her death to her was a relief, and a release from her burdens.

From the women of Qionghua House, less than twenty remained. The arrow wound on Duan Ling’s back had been bandaged but still seeped red. He looked to Xunchun.

“There’s a path through the back of the city guard headquarters,” she declared.

Duan Ling hesitated more than once along their escape route. He knew his father had likely fought his way into Shangjing, but with the chaos

everywhere, he had no idea where the Chen army even was. Xunchun had urged him in the strongest terms to put survival first and foremost—and not to turn back rashly.

The moment they entered the city guard headquarters, a squadron of Mongols ambushed them with a torrent of arrows. They had been lying in wait for Khitan soldiers but instead encountered civilians fleeing the battle.

“Retreat!” Xunchun cried.

Two more girls were shot dead as they fled for cover. Duan Ling fended off their attackers, protecting the group as he fired back. With a furious cry, Xunchun charged up the wall in two great bounds and ran the archer through with one smooth strike of her blade. As Duan Ling called to her from below, more shouts of alarm sounded from behind. Yuan reinforcements were on their way, and fast.

“Run!” Xunchun ordered.

Duan Ling and the group fled deeper into the city guard headquarters as more Mongols arrived to replace their dispatched comrades. Without warning, someone burst from behind a closed door with a nocked arrow pointed straight at Duan Ling. He jerked back in alarm before he recognized Cai Yan.

Cai Yan loosed the arrow. Duan Ling froze on instinct as it skimmed past his shoulder and punched through the chest of the Mongol cavalryman charging him from behind. There was no time for an emotional reunion as Cai Yan began dragging Duan Ling away. “Follow me!”

Xunchun turned from them, the Cleaver of the Land in her left hand and a saber she’d snatched from a Mongol soldier in her right. “I’ll cover you! Get out of the city, *now*!”

She stood alone in the way of a dozen Mongol soldiers.

Before Duan Ling could protest, Cai Yan was hauling him down the path. Though everyone was out of breath and Cai Yan had taken an arrow to the leg, the group made haste along the rocky trail behind the city guard headquarters toward the mountains; without hesitation they lowered themselves down a rope, making their way out of the city.

“What were you doing in the city guard headquarters?” Duan Ling finally asked.

“It was either stay home and wait to be slaughtered or camp out there and kill whoever I could,” Cai Yan explained as he caught his breath. “What about… I heard the Chen army arrived. We might be able to win. Will you…?”

Duan Ling looked steadily back at him, and they lapsed into silence. In the end, Cai Yan didn’t speak his true identity aloud.

A loud rumble startled the pair—the sound of the north gate collapsing. In the far distance, on the roof of the city guard headquarters, Xunchun’s red robe flashed through the air as she held off the Mongols. But they were like a swarm of locusts, and in no time at all, they’d overrun the streets of the north district.

“We should go,” Duan Ling said.

He and Cai Yan tallied the survivors. Aside from the two of them, only nine girls were left.

But where could they flee? Further into the Xianbei Mountains? Every other road led to danger. Southward was the battleground of a hundred thousand soldiers; they’d never make it through alive. On the other hand, the lands to the east and west would be filled with deserters.

“We’ll head north and hide in the mountains for now,” Duan Ling decided.

In the city, Mongols were ransacking every house in the north district and shooting survivors on sight.

Duan Ling and his party set out through the rugged wilderness on foot, eventually ducking into a wheat field under the open skies. Li Jianhong had taught him he must never let his guard down near the battlefield so long as there was still any possible threat. One must keep their wits about them because one never knew when they might come upon a deserter—and a deserter was more dangerous than a soldier. Those who fled from battle would be paranoid that anyone they encountered would report them, leading to their capture and execution. Under threat of death, there was nothing a deserter wouldn’t do.

Most of the day was spent trekking through the endless wheat fields. The sun beat down until Duan Ling started to feel lightheaded from the heat. The arrow wound on his back stung horribly. With no medicine to apply to the wound, he'd developed a fever along the way, his head throbbing and his vision blurring. Eventually his legs gave out, and he slumped to the ground.

"Duan Ling!" Cai Yan cried in alarm.

A few girls had fallen behind in the wheat fields, and those who remained were worn to the bone. While Cai Yan hoisted Duan Ling onto his back and began searching for a place to rest, more girls turned back in search of their own companions.

A shrill scream split the skies: "The Mongols are here! *Run!*"

All the girls of Qionghua House knew some martial arts, but they were already exhausted from being forced to flee again and again. It would only be a matter of time until the mighty Mongols on horseback overpowered any defense they might put up with waves of arrows, saber slashes, and flying ring-shaped lasso poles. When they heard the warning cry, the girls—one by one—resolved to stay and hold the enemy off, urging the rest of the party to go ahead.

At last, Cai Yan reached for his blade with a howl, intending to face down the Mongols. It was Ding Zhi who dragged him back by his lapels. "If your brother was still alive, he wouldn't want you to die here," she said coldly, staring him dead in the eye.

Cai Yan's chest worked as he gazed back at her.

"Come on!" Ding Zhi commanded.

Cai Yan fled with Ding Zhi deeper into the fields, carrying the collapsed Duan Ling on his back. Piercing cries echoed through the wheat stalks as the girls who stayed behind were shot down. Ding Zhi couldn't help but turn back again, barely resisting the urge to run to their rescue. She protected her charges until the fields came to an end, and they arrived on the shore of a lake, Duan Ling bouncing woozily on Cai Yan's back the whole way. A small shack stood on the banks with a boat anchored to its dock.

“Follow the shore of the lake southeast and head into the mountains. You’ll be safe there,” she promised.

The noise of slaughter grew closer as she untied the rope tethering the boat to the dock. Mongol soldiers, galloping fast, were nearing. Cai Yan lowered Duan Ling into the boat, and Ding Zhi untied the rope and camouflaged it among the reeds.

“Don’t come out,” she whispered. “No matter what.”

Cai Yan stared at her. Ding Zhi met his eyes, lips curving into a soft smile as she reached out and stroked his cheek.

“No…” His eyes welled with tears, but Ding Zhi simply laid her hand over his mouth and pushed him down into the boat beside Duan Ling. She turned, drew her dagger, and ran toward the front of the shack. The Mongol soldiers bellowed in pain, then suddenly, all was quiet.

A single shriek from Ding Zhi pierced the silence.

Duan Ling’s eyes snapped open, terrified. He would’ve lunged upright were it not for Cai Yan firmly holding him down. An eternity seemed to pass before Ding Zhi’s screaming stopped.

Afterward the Mongols patrolled the banks several times on horseback, but all they found was the broken rope. They rode off along the lakeshore barking curses.

The thick bed of reeds seemed to stretch on forever, swaying gently in the breeze. The setting sun over the mountain dyed the lake crimson, and the waves glistened in the failing light. The wind carried the scent of dry grass, and white clouds drifted across a sky so blue it was as if it had been rinsed clean. Ding Zhi’s naked corpse floated on the placid water, her hair loose, blood blooming around her like a plume of smoke. Her unseeing eyes reflected the vast, brilliant sky.

A day later, Cai Yan whispered, “Drink some water.”

Duan Ling woke shivering through a coughing fit. He found himself lying in a strange house with Cai Yan, who gave him an herbal decoction and began removing his bandages.

“Where are we?” Duan Ling asked.

“A village,” Cai Yan answered curtly. “An herb village, three days outside the city.”

The village in which they had landed lay nestled in the southeast stretch of the Xianbei Mountains and was home to a dozen or so people who had made their living harvesting medicinal herbs for generations.

Duan Ling felt slightly better after drinking the medicine. Seeing the look in Cai Yan’s eyes, he asked, “What about everyone else?”

“We lost them.”

The autumn breeze picked up in the afternoon, rustling against the window. The air was crisp and fresh, and the blazing sun cast the dappled shadows of swaying leaves on the window. Duan Ling felt as if he was inside a vivid dream. Sighing deeply, he lay back down for a moment to gather his strength and slipped his feet over the side of the bed. “Is there any news about my dad?”

“I don’t know,” Cai Yan said. “I didn’t have time to ask. Survival came first; as long as we’re alive, we can sort the rest out later.”

Duan Ling met his eyes.

“Heal up first,” Cai Yan said. “Then you can plan your route south. You can go back to Xichuan, and I’ll go back to Zhongjing.”

After another break, Duan Ling managed to walk a short distance. He patted his chest out of habit—but the jade arc was missing.

Cai Yan sat completely still in the doorway.

Oh no, where’d it go? Duan Ling thought. *I’ll need to prove my identity if I run into Chen soldiers.* He patted himself down from head to toe, but the jade arc wasn’t there.

“Looking for this?” Cai Yan asked, pulling the familiar pouch from his robe, its cord dangling.

Duan Ling breathed a sigh of relief and looped the cord around his neck. “Thank you.”

“I grabbed your sword too,” Cai Yan added. “But I couldn’t find the sheath.”

“That’s okay,” Duan Ling said. He wasn’t particularly attached to this sword. He stared at Cai Yan for a moment, then sank to his knees.

“Don’t! You’re the crown prince!” Cai Yan cried, swiftly reaching out to help him up.

“You saved my life,” Duan Ling said simply.

“Your father taught me martial arts to protect you, and those girls—they all gave their lives not because of their ties to you, but because of…” Duan Ling stayed silent, and for a moment Cai Yan didn’t know how to finish the sentence. “…who you are,” he said finally.

Duan Ling nodded and heaved another sigh.

Soon enough, a villager returned. Cai Yan stepped outside to ask for any news of the war. The man informed him that the Liao reinforcements had arrived in Shangjing, and though the city was ravaged, it had fallen back into Khitan hands. As for where the Yuan army had gone, no one knew.

“What about the Chen army?” Cai Yan asked.

“They went home. They went home, oh, they went home,” the old ginseng farmer repeated, singsong. “First it was Great Yu, then it was Great Xia, then it was Great Chen, and now it’s Great Liao. The world never stops turning. One leaves the stage and the next steps on.”

They went home? Duan Ling thought. His father must have left when he couldn’t find him—that was a good thing; it would be too dangerous if he’d stayed. But…had he really left so easily? Perhaps he was still out scouring the lands for him.

Later that night, as Duan Ling sat in the doorway hugging his knees and looking up at the early autumn sky spangled with stars, his thoughts drifted back to his father.

Dad must be worried sick. But what can I do? Should I leave now? No, it’ll be even more dangerous if I run into the Yuan army, especially after they lost the battle. Ögedei must be burning, killing, and looting his way home after such a defeat.

The world was ever-changing, as fickle as the shifting clouds in the sky…but in this little pocket of the mountains, secluded from the outside

world, all of that seemed an eternity away. His father had once said that, back when his own former allies were hunting him, he'd hidden in Lang Junxia's home deep within the Xianbei Mountains. Perhaps he'd felt the same way then.

"Get some sleep. It's chilly," Cai Yan said. After another moment's pause, he observed: "Hundreds of thousands are dying out there in the war, but here in this little village, it's like none of that affects them."

"That's just how the common folk are," Duan Ling said.

Just as he was about to step inside, a piercing scream rang out in the distance, followed by the sound of rumbling hooves Duan Ling knew too well. He dropped onto his stomach at once, pressing his ear to the ground to listen for the distant echo of stomping hooves in their thousands. "The Mongols are coming!"

Elsewhere, on the banks of that placid lake, Lang Junxia reined Skychaser to a halt and dismounted. Pitch-black water sloshed in the night as he fished Ding Zhi's body from the lake and laid it out on the shore. With another quick glance around, he whistled for Skychaser, leapt astride, and rode deeper into the Xianbei Mountains.

Chapter 39

A MONGOL SOLDIER CHARGED into the village before Duan Ling and Cai Yan could make a move, tossing flaming torches onto the straw-roofed houses and shooting the fleeing villagers dead on sight. At this hour, many were still sound asleep in their beds; they lost their lives completely unaware. One villager ran from a burning house wreathed in flames, only to be trampled under a soldier's horse.

The soldier broke out in raucous laughter. To him, these villagers were nothing more than playthings. He shot those he saw first, then began kicking doors open one by one, looking for women and children.

Duan Ling burst through his own closed door and stabbed the soldier in the throat. Jerking, the man dropped to his knees and slumped over, dead.

After dragging the body into the house, Duan Ling and Cai Yan peered through the window. More Mongols were arriving, as if planning to camp there.

"We need to run before it's too late," Duan Ling said. "Those are all defeated soldiers, and there's bound to be more of them."

Cai Yan took a deep breath and looked him in the eye, preparing to declare that he'd stay behind while Duan Ling escaped. Duan Ling grabbed his wrist and slowly shook his head. Cai Yan understood: Duan Ling didn't want anyone else to sacrifice their life on his behalf. If they were to die, they would die together. The two of them crawled with great care out the house's back window.

As they hurried away from the village, an incoming Mongol cavalryman shot a pair of arrows at them. Duan Ling and Cai Yan ducked. The Mongol soldier reined his horse to a stop and watched them for a moment, hesitating, before he decided against pursuit and galloped into the village proper.

Duan Ling's heart pounded wildly in his chest. Cai Yan thought surely they'd narrowly escaped danger. But a cacophony of shouts erupted

behind them almost immediately, and the pair cried out in alarm, bolting into the trees.

“Run!” Cai Yan shouted.

The defeated Yuan soldiers, all laughing riotously, galloped after them. The Mongols saw fleeing villagers as animals to be hunted for sport and competed with one another to see who could catch these two rabbits first. Duan Ling fled death through the pitch-dark night. Unless they could shake them, they’d meet their end here.

As he and Cai Yan groped their way through in the darkness, Duan Ling didn’t make a sound, enduring the many scrapes and scratches from the surrounding brush yet never once daring to stop. But the complex landscape of the Xianbei Mountains and the winding forest path were completely unknown to them, and they had no idea what lay ahead. At any moment they might step off a cliff or tumble into a bottomless ravine. In the night, even the trees and bushes loomed at them, as eerie and sinister as ghosts.

I can’t die. Dad’s still waiting for me, was Duan Ling’s singular thought as he ran for all he was worth.

A lasso came flying from behind and looped around his neck.

“Run!” he hollered to Cai Yan at the top of his lungs.

Cai Yan spun around to help, but Duan Ling had already been hauled off his feet. A laughing Mongol on horseback dragged him through the undergrowth all the way down the slope. As he bounced over jagged rocks and thorny brambles, Duan Ling yanked on the tightening noose around his neck with both hands.

By the time the rider dragged him back into the village, Duan Ling’s body was scraped and bruised from head to toe, his neck about to snap. The soldier grabbed him and chuckled while speaking with the others. Yanking Duan Ling upright by the hair, he used a dagger to cut the choking noose around his neck. Duan Ling fell to his knees, dry heaving, but the Mongol hauled him up again, making quick work of peeling his outer robe off and ripping the pouch from his neck before tossing both aside. The soldier tore open Duan Ling’s underrobe and leaned into his chest, then suddenly stopped.

The entire group burst into gales of laughter when they realized Duan Ling was a man.

Duan Ling understood instantly. The Mongols, assuming he and Cai Yan were a young couple fleeing the massacre, had thought to capture the wife and drag her back to the village—they had no interest in the husband. The soldier slapped Duan Ling across the face so hard his ears rang. If he fought back now, he could snatch the blade strapped to the soldier's waist while his guard was down and kill him, but then the other soldiers would shoot him full of holes. Instead, he went limp as the soldier struck him, over and over, until blood dripped from his lips.

He waited until the Mongol dragged him into a nearby house.

A dead body was already lying on the bed inside. The Mongol undressed crudely beside the corpse, stripping himself naked before tearing at Duan Ling's pants. Duan Ling suffered the soldier's fumbling while surreptitiously slipping his hand into his boot to grab the bone dagger hidden there. The soldier clicked his tongue and said something in Mongolian before yanking him up by the hair for a good look at his face. As he leaned in to kiss Duan Ling as if he were a girl, Duan Ling whipped the dagger out and stabbed him.

Flawless aim lodged the dagger right in the man's throat. The soldier grabbed for his neck, gurgling a cry for help, and Duan Ling twisted the knife. Blood sprayed through the air. When the man fell still, he carefully laid the corpse down on the floor while the other soldiers carried on loudly drinking and merry-making outside, completely unaware of their companion's fate.

Duan Ling crept from the house's rear window, then fled down another trail that ended in a bottomless slot canyon, which he very nearly stepped right into. Moving from one end of the precipice, he shifted along the edge until he found the spot where the other side seemed closest. In the dark woods, with thick clouds blocking the moonlight, he couldn't discern whether the patch of darkness on the other side was a shrub or an overhang.

I can't die. I can't die. Dad's still out there looking for me.

Remembering Li Jianhong's lessons, Duan Ling abandoned all fear and leapt across the gap. His foot touched down on the edge of the cliff, then slipped. As he scrabbled at the vines on the cliff face, using all his

strength to try and haul himself up, the vine in his hands broke with a soft *snap*.

Duan Ling tumbled into the void still clutching the broken vine, the jagged rock face scraping his skin all the way down.

Flames lit the sky a crimson red. Cai Yan, utterly lost, groped his way down the mountain path. When he heard the sound of hooves, he ducked back into the trees for cover.

A lone man cantered down the winding road. He pulled his horse to a halt and dismounted, drawing his sword as he approached the undergrowth.

Cai Yan held his breath, silent.

The man's sword flashed. Cai Yan barely had time to block the slash before a palm struck his stomach, the impact rippling through his insides. In what felt like an instant, the sharp edge of the sword came to rest against his neck.

"Duan Ling?" said Lang Junxia.

"It's me!" Cai Yan cried in answer.

Recognizing him, Lang Junxia sheathed his sword, and the pair continued along the mountain road on Skychaser's back. Cai Yan recounted everything that had happened since leaving Shangjing. Lang Junxia listened without a word.

"You came down another peak," Lang Junxia said when he was done. "I know where that herb village is." He spurred Skychaser onward with a cry.

It took them two hours to arrive, and by that time, the whole village had been consumed by the crackling flames. In the pale light of dawn, they could see the Mongol soldiers were already long gone.

"Duan Ling!" Lang Junxia called.

"Duan Ling!" Cai Yan shouted.

"Duan Ling!" Lang Junxia's voice echoed through the valley. He began trying to quash the fires, but they continued to grow, uncontrollable. The acrid smell of burnt flesh floated through the air, and blackened bodies

were strewn over the ground. Lang Junxia looked toward the crumbling houses.

“Don’t go in!” Cai Yan cried after him.

But Lang Junxia had already covered his nose and mouth and dashed into the burning village. Moments later, he ran back out, and Cai Yan rushed forward to help him stagger aside. The two of them leaned against a tree on the perimeter of the village, Cai Yan crying his heart out.

“Swear to me! Swear he was really here!” Lang Junxia roared.

But Cai Yan couldn’t answer, too deep in his sorrow.

Lang Junxia took several heaving breaths, then rose to his feet. He took in the scene: ash floating through the air amid a sea of flames.

“Why didn’t you come earlier?!” Cai Yan finally howled in a weeping rage, stumbling over to shove at him.

The fire blazed on, leaping from the houses to the trees along the forested mountaintop. Cai Yan and Lang Junxia were forced to retreat again and again until a heavy rain began pouring down, extinguishing the flames and washing mud and rocks down from the slopes above.

When the fire was out, Lang Junxia walked into the razed village.

In the center clearing, he found half a shimmering jade arc amid the ashes, washed clean by the rain as if newly carved. He sank to his knees on the ground, inspecting each nearby body, touching every blackened wrist to check if it belonged to Duan Ling.

“What’s your name?” Cai Yan demanded, having somewhat mastered himself.

Lang Junxia ignored him.

“Why didn’t you come earlier to protect him?!” Cai Yan demanded.

Lang Junxia rummaged through the ruins until he found another blackened wrist to examine for likeness to Duan Ling’s. Before Cai Yan could interrogate him again, Lang Junxia turned and kicked him in the chest with such force that he went flying. Cai Yan slammed into the trunk of a tree, unconscious.

When he regained his senses and opened his eyes, Lang Junxia was still scouring the remains of the village.

“He’s dead,” said Cai Yan. “It’s too late to feel regret now.”

Exhausted in the extreme, Lang Junxia sank once more to his knees in the middle of the village, hunched over in the mud.

The mountain creek babbled as it rushed into the ravine. Duan Ling woke, bleeding, to find a pack of wild dogs eyeing him from afar. He struggled to his feet in the shallow water and limped out of sight of their hungry eyes.

“If you die…”

“I know. If I die, you won’t be able to go on.”

Duan Ling didn’t know where he found the strength, but perhaps it was from those words echoing through his head. Using every ounce of his will, Duan Ling crawled out of the narrow ravine and located a cave in the darkness, which he crawled into headfirst. Once inside, he lay down to catch his breath.

Fever again overtook him. He lay delirious in its grip for an entire day but miraculously pulled through. *If you die, your father won’t be able to go on.* He heard those same words in his dreams, as if Li Jianhong’s soft lips were whispering right beside his ear, encouraging him to live.

I can’t…die here.

Survival was the only thing on Duan Ling’s mind when he opened his eyes again.

When he could move a little, he discovered several medicinal herbs growing inside the cave and swallowed them whole, then peeled free some moss and tree bark to eat as well. With that, he set off on his journey south.

As he made his way, he never once ran into bears, tigers, or any other fierce animals. *Perhaps the heavens are watching over me after all*, he thought. His feet became bloodied and blistered after days of walking, but he wrapped them in tree bark and carried on. His harsh childhood had given him a steely resistance. He didn’t starve in the woods: He scooped eggs from birds’ nests, plucked wild fruit, and swallowed both flowers and the live fish he caught whole. Anything and everything that could be eaten, he ate.

When he at last came down from the eastern stretch of the Xianbei Mountains, Duan Ling knew he would survive.

A village appeared in the distance. Duan Ling hid behind a farmhouse and waited patiently; once night fell, he snuck inside and stole a set of robes he wrapped around himself, a pair of boots he put on, and two eggs he cracked and wolfed down on the spot. He stuck his hand into the stove, grabbed some hot lumps of dough to stash in his breast pocket, and continued on his way.

It wasn't until later, when Duan Ling properly changed into his stolen robes, that he realized he'd lost the jade arc at some point during his struggles.

It's okay, he thought. *Between the jade arc and my life, Dad won't scold me for losing the arc.*

But where on earth was he? Duan Ling instinctively followed the handle of the Big Dipper southward along a narrow track, ducking into the trees like a startled deer whenever he heard approaching voices. It occurred to him that the larger roads would have villages along them, and as expected, he passed through several along the way. By the look of the hanging laundry, the villagers were most likely Xianbei.

Every time he happened upon a village, Duan Ling nicked a few things. He wondered when he would be safe—when he might finally reach the official road south. On one particular night, he lay under a tree looking up at the scattered stars and wondered: Was Li Jianhong sunk in despair, believing he was lost? Had he pulled out his sword to take his own life, and if so, how had his subordinates stopped him?

Would he weep with joy when Duan Ling returned?

Would he sob in pain, clutching his head?

The more he imagined, the more he found his stray thoughts strangely amusing. Duan Ling burst into laughter, but even as he laughed he began to choke up, until eventually, he curled into a ball against the trunk of the tree and sobbed.

If only he could return safely, they would never be parted again.

Tears made bright tracks down Duan Ling's face as he slept.

Some time later, he was awakened by an animal pouncing on him. Duan Ling screamed—a dog had sniffed him out. He scrambled for his dagger in defense, but when he heard a man’s voice calling out, he changed his mind and gave up on fighting back.

The man approached through the field, speaking to the dog in the Xianbei language. Upon reaching Duan Ling, he dangled a lantern before his face and took a good long look at him.

Chapter 40

THE MAN, as it turned out, was an old farmer, and he began questioning Duan Ling right away. Duan Ling clutched his dagger; the moment the man made any wrong move, he was prepared to take his life. But when the farmer realized Duan Ling was Han, he dropped his suspicions and waved him onto his oxcart before hanging the lantern back up and continuing on his way.

Fleeing day after day had drained Duan Ling of all his strength. He gratefully curled up in the heap of hay and fell asleep. By daybreak, they had already traveled a long distance from that lonely tree.

Duan Ling woke when he felt a warm body wriggle into his arms. As a wet tongue licked at his face, Duan Ling instinctively reached for his dagger again—only to find that the big dog was already holding his weapon smartly in its mouth. Finding the sight comically absurd, Duan Ling took the dagger and rubbed the creature's head.

It was a crisp autumn day. The farmer sat by the roadside chatting with some people, and further ahead, Duan Ling could see that the road came to a stop at a densely populated village.

He hopped off the oxcart and knelt to the farmer in gratitude before setting off again on his way.

"Hey, hey!" the farmer called after him, then handed him a cloth bag stuffed with flatbreads.

Duan Ling wolfed a few down as he walked. He drank from the mountain springs whenever he felt thirsty. The air had grown steadily colder during his travels, so Duan Ling took advantage of the bright sunny day to strip naked for a bath in the creek. Sitting on his haunches and washing his hair, he saw that the reflection of his nude body in the water no longer had the rounded softness of a child. The creek instead showed a handsome young man.

I've grown up, Duan Ling thought.

He would turn fifteen next year. He'd grown a great deal taller, and developed muscular arms and a broad back and shoulders from archery; his chest now boasted faint contours. The lean, handsome youth reflected in the water felt like a stranger to him. After washing and drying his clothes, he dressed again, slung a cloth bag across his shoulder, and set off whistling down his path of loneliness and sorrow.

The last yellow leaf drifted from its branch. Winter had arrived at the road leading to Yubi Pass, and Duan Ling with it.

The area around Yubi Pass was filled with refugees fleeing south. Duan Ling merged with the crowd, overhearing every dialect of Khitan, Xianbei, Han, and Tangut mixed together. These common folk all either had families with them or had banded together after their families were scattered by war. Everyone comforted each other through their tears and shared their hardships as they shuffled south as one. Duan Ling walked in the middle of the crowd, always peering ahead. The great stream of people seemed to have no end, perhaps numbering as many as three or four hundred thousand.

Until now, Yubi Pass had refused to open for the refugees. To get around it, many had attempted to follow Jiangjun Ridge south. Some were shot by errant Mongols, while others tumbled to their deaths traversing the steep cliffs. All along the way, bodies lay stripped bare of their clothes and belongings. Duan Ling was no stranger to death, but even he couldn't hold back tears at the sight.

Fortunately, Yubi Pass finally opened before the first snow, and the grateful refugees swarmed down into the Central Plains. Duan Ling found himself at a crossroads with no idea in which direction he should go.

"Excuse me," he said to another traveler. "Which way is Xichuan?"

"Xichuan?" the man replied. "Xichuan is really far…"

More people pushed them from behind, separating Duan Ling from the man before he caught the end of the sentence. He was forced to ask someone else.

"Why're you going to Xichuan?" his fellow refugee asked.

"I'm looking for my dad," Duan Ling yelled past a man with vacant eyes.

“To get to Xichuan, you’d go west, of course!” the stranger called back to him, already several feet away.

And so Duan Ling set out once more, but he couldn’t outpace the wind and snow on foot. The further he walked, the colder it became. Winter had arrived south of the pass.

Since leaving the Xianbei Mountains, Duan Ling had made his way south wearing the shabby clothes of a beggar; all along the way he’d stolen the plainest clothes to wrap himself in. His hair was a mess, and bloody blisters still marred his feet.

By the time I reach Xichuan, Dad won’t even recognize me, he thought, self-mocking.

Several times, he’d seen Southern Chen soldiers ride past and had a sudden urge to throw himself in front of their horses and declare: *I’m your crown prince—take me back to Xichuan, now!*

But it was just a fantasy; he’d look like a lunatic if he tried. With no other choice, Duan Ling walked until he could walk no further—until he was sure that if he kept going, he would freeze to death on the road.

As true winter descended over the northern Central Plains, Duan Ling stopped and sought shelter in the city of Luoyan.

The first heavy snowfall arrived without warning, draping the earth in a blanket of white. Within a single night, Luoyan became a glistening sculpture of pale jade. The temples, streets, and alleyways were packed with refugees fleeing the war. Duan Ling found a spot to huddle for the night in a run-down temple, squeezed close against a wall that leaked wind through the cracks.

Familiar sensations, carved into his bones during his childhood, came flooding back: Hunger, cold, and pain from his injuries gnawed steadily at his soul. His empty belly was like a greedy wolf tearing his insides into mangled pulp; the icy wind had the sharpness of a knife as it slashed at every inch of his skin, protected only by a single layer of cloth, and the pain was like a thousand needles pricking him all over. These feelings tormented him, wave after wave, until his body convulsed with shivers. Duan Ling curled into a ball and hugged himself, shaking terribly. Through a gap in the wall, he watched the snow fluttering down through the warm glow of the

city lights. The falling snow covered the dead and living alike, the same across all space and time.

Behind him stood a decrepit statue of the goddess Guanyin with her hands pinched in lotus fingers, its paint peeling but its expression ever so kind and merciful as it overlooked the freezing, tragic souls in the temple.

More than a thousand people froze to death that night in Luoyan.

The next morning, Duan Ling staggered to his feet and stepped outside only to find that nearly half the people temporarily dwelling at the temple had stopped breathing before dawn. He had to go to the market and find work as soon as possible or suffer the same fate.

The market bustled with people wrapped in thick cotton coats; Duan Ling stood in the snow, looking a plea at every person who hazarded a glance his way, though he was too cold to speak.

“You selling your body?”

“N-no,” Duan Ling stuttered through chattering teeth.

A few local ruffians found his plight comical and pretended to examine him, patting his cheeks and wrenching his mouth open to check his teeth. They told him to walk for them, but Duan Ling had taken only a few steps before they lost interest and went off to watch cricket fights.

He considered pawning his bone dagger, or pointing it at someone’s back and demanding money. Even grabbing a handful of coins from a stall and bolting would probably tide him over for a time, and he wouldn’t be wrong to do it. After all, the land and riches of the south rightfully belonged to him. Still, he never stooped to those desperate lengths.

His own words from childhood echoed in his head: *“I didn’t steal anything! I didn’t steal the madam’s money!”*

In the evening, a clamor broke out in the city.

“Come warm up by the fire!” someone called.

The merchants had packed up their market stalls for the night. Duan Ling followed the gathering crowd into an alleyway where a courtyard house had gone up in flames. People clustered a safe distance from the fire to absorb some of its heat. Hearing the cry of a baby from inside, Duan

Ling quickly grabbed a handful of snow to stuff into a two-pocket coin pouch, then covered his face with it as he ran into the flames.

When he emerged with the babe in his arms, he asked frantically, “Whose child is this?”

Nobody answered him. Duan Ling asked everyone he saw, but no one claimed the child.

What kind of situation was this? He’d rescued a child from burning to death, yet no one wanted it. When the city guard arrived, they couldn’t tame the fire, so they simply stood around watching the house burn. Duan Ling’s only choice was to carry the baby away with him. He sank down in front of an apothecary’s shop, numb from the chill. *Dad, I’m so cold. I’m about to die*, he thought, his head spinning. The baby’s cries gradually died down. Was the child tired, or dead? Duan Ling patted him gently, and as if regaining some hope, the baby began wailing at the top of his lungs.

The door to the shop swung open.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” the apothecary asked. “Why don’t you come inside?”

Duan Ling crawled over the threshold, shivering, his life granted back to him. He spent the whole night warming himself next to the stove used for making medicines, so starved his vision had gone patchy. Later in the night, the apothecary returned with two taels of wine he’d bought. He poured himself a drink and tossed two pieces of flatbread to Duan Ling. Instead of eating them himself, Duan Ling tore off small morsels and fed the baby.

The owner cast Duan Ling a sidelong glance. “Where did you steal the little one from?”

“I saved him from the fire,” Duan Ling said.

“A pitiful child,” the owner sighed. “Why don’t you give him to me? I’ve been thinking about finding a child to raise.”

Duan Ling himself had been unwanted; it was nothing short of miraculous that the abandoned baby could survive in such an era. The apothecary’s previous assistant had resigned and returned to his hometown, and the owner now did the weighing, cutting, pill-baking, and poultice-

making himself—in addition to scribbling directions for delivery to the great households alongside their medicine, providing care for the rich and all their fanciful ailments.

And so it was that the owner and his wife, who had no children of their own, decided to adopt the baby, while Duan Ling made his bed at the foot of the medicine cabinets and became the apothecary's temporary assistant.

Most refugees who'd fled to the city were unskilled and could only make a living by stealing. But Duan Ling was a neat and efficient worker, and educated to boot. He could differentiate medicinal herbs and knew how to copy prescriptions in an elegant script, never once making a mistake when dispensing medicines. Fearing the city officials would discover he was sheltering a refugee, the apothecary kept him hidden in a dark side building where the dried herbs were stashed and instructed him to pick, cut, and weigh the ingredients to assemble prescriptions. Nonetheless, he provided Duan Ling's meals, and his wife would occasionally visit with the baby in her arms; she even gave him a few coins.

Ultimately the apothecary, satisfied with Duan Ling's work, decided to let him stay. Before he knew it, three months passed this way. He'd survived the coldest part of the winter. The owner allowed him to pick out a few old cotton coats he no longer wanted for himself, doubly wonderful as they were both free and warm. On top of that, he'd accumulated some meager savings for travel. Finally he could continue onward to Xichuan.

After asking around for directions, he found that Xichuan was about half a month's journey. Since he had no proper registry slip, he wouldn't be able to enter the capital legally, but who cared—he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. Besides, could they really keep him out?

When the snow began to melt, Duan Ling packed up his belongings, such as they were, and gave the wailing baby one last fond stroke on the head. He closed the door of the apothecary firmly shut behind him. Leaving only a short farewell note for the family, he strapped his cloth bag to his back and set out once again on the road home.

As spring slowly unfurled all around him, his time spent in Luoyan became merely one insignificant page in his journey's story. After a half

month of walking along the official road, Duan Ling reached Jiang Prefectural City.

So this is the place Dad talked so much about.

The city was as splendid as Li Jianhong had described, except that there were as yet no peach blossoms—it was still too early for them to bloom.

He attempted asking some passersby how to get to Xichuan but found the local dialect hard to understand. One man promised to take him there but turned out to be only toying with Duan Ling, who foolishly lost some money on the affair. After asking around further, he finally managed to board a boat for a hundred and twenty coins at a harbor on the outskirts of the city, sharing sleeping quarters with the crew. They sailed upriver for Xichuan. It was warm in the south. Duan Ling basked quietly in the beautiful sunlight at the bow, apart from everyone else.

The deep green mountains on both sides of the river were like the flowing ink of a landscape painting. The sight reminded him of the night Lang Junxia had taken him away from Runan.

At last, he arrived in Xichuan.

Everything before his eyes—Mount Wenzhong, the maple forests and the winding rivers, the city itself—was a place Li Jianhong had once spoken of fondly. Duan Ling felt connected to this land, yet also strangely detached. As he stood again on the official road, a gentle breeze carried past him. Tender, green fields of wheat stretched endlessly on either side. The spring sowing season had come.

Today marked exactly six months since he’d fled Shangjing.

Chapter 41

DUAN LING RESEMBLED a rogue swordsman with his dagger strapped to his side, a little medicine pouch on his belt, and his clothes wrapped up in a cloth bundle and tied across his back. Battered as he was by the elements, he had grown rangy and tanned from basking in the sun the whole way.

He paced outside the city walls, observing. The guards checked the documents of all who entered the city; he didn't dare approach rashly for fear they would arrest him and throw him directly in prison. Though he was one step away from entering Xichuan, the final portion of any endeavor should be undertaken with the most caution. Duan Ling had thought up a million different ways he might be reunited with his father, but what stuck out most clearly in his head just then was an important lesson Li Jianhong had taught him: The closer you are to your goal, the more careful you must be.

The worst-case scenario would be if he was arrested the second he got inside. If power currently rested with Mu Kuangda, he might throw Duan Ling in prison without even telling Li Jianhong he'd come. Thus, he couldn't simply announce himself at the gate. Yet after watching people passing through for some time, Duan Ling noticed the guards were often lax in checking papers. He waited three more days on the city outskirts until the guards got drunk one night, then carefully used his martial arts to leap over the city tower's low gate.

But where should he go next? Xichuan was dead silent, and guards patrolled the streets at night. Duan Ling hid himself in an alleyway, surveying the streets with caution.

Where's the imperial palace? No, that wouldn't do—he couldn't hope to enter the imperial palace by sneaking around scaling walls. He had to find someone trustworthy who could pass a message for him, but what should the message be?

His jade arc was lost. The only token of identity he could produce was the bone dagger from Batu, which Li Jianhong had seen before. Should

he simply lie and report himself as an envoy? Could he somehow get the bone dagger in front of his dad? Li Jianhong had only taken a brief glance at it previously. Would he still remember it? Surely he would.

Duan Ling was so anxious he didn't sleep the entire night. At dawn he was exhausted, but his mind was sharp.

The market in Xichuan bustled in the spring. Duan Ling was once again so hungry he was seeing stars, but as he snuck out of the alleyway, he noticed someone watching him and quickened his steps. After a big bowl of perilla wontons from a street stall, he made up his mind to try his luck at the palace gate. If the attempt didn't work, he could do what he'd done in Luoyan: find work and a place to settle down while he took his time coming up with a better plan.

"Clear the way!"

Guards parted the crowd for Mu Kuangda's sedan chair to pass through. The people of Xichuan were used to this. Duan Ling stood watching from afar, noting that Mu Kuangda was alive after all.

In the afternoon, Duan Ling arrived before the gate of the imperial palace carrying his only token of identity, the bone dagger Batu had gifted him before they parted.

"Excuse me," he called.

One of the two guards at the gate cast him a silent glance.

"Is His Majesty in the palace?" Duan Ling asked.

No answer; the guard was far too used to being approached thusly by strangers. Duan Ling stuck a hand into his pocket and began to roam idly around the area. The guard fixed his eyes on him.

"Get moving," he ordered.

The two guards unsheathed their swords, and Duan Ling quickly stepped back. "I have something to present to His Majesty!"

"What's going on here?" said another guard as he walked out from inside the palace gate. Judging by the pair of guards flanking him, he was the captain of these men. "What's your name?"

“Surname Duan,” Duan Ling replied before presenting the dagger with both hands. “I’m here to return this to His Majesty, its original owner.”

The captain watched him with suspicion. “Where did you get that? And where are your registry papers?”

“I am not from Xichuan,” Duan Ling explained. “I came from the Xianbei Mountains.”

“Where do you live? Leave an address and wait for us to contact you.”

“I’ll wait here,” Duan Ling said. After all, he had no place to stay.

“There’s no use waiting. His Majesty is not in the palace.”

Duan Ling’s heart sank. *Dad’s not here?!*

He nearly asked where the emperor had gone, but thought, reasonably, that he wouldn’t get an answer. And what if the captain gave his dagger to someone else? He remembered Li Jianhong saying he also had a fourth uncle. The dagger probably wouldn’t fall into Mu Kuangda’s hands, and even if it did, Mu Kuangda could hardly know the meaning behind it—but he couldn’t risk it.

“When will His Majesty return?” Duan Ling asked.

“I don’t know,” said the captain.

Duan Ling ducked away from the guards and hid behind a stack of chests on the street, gazing at the gate from afar.

Dusk approached, minute by minute. Growing tired, Duan Ling shifted his weight from foot to foot as he leaned against the chests, staring resolutely at the gate. Every person who exited—whether eunuch, guard, or palace maid—sparked his hopes, but they were always in a rush, never stopping for long. As the sky grew dark, he realized he had to find shelter for the night. He’d passed by a bridge, Fengshui Bridge, on his way to the palace; he could probably sleep beneath it.

Where did Dad go? Duan Ling wondered.

When the palace lamps were lit, glowing brightly against the gathering dark, he at last decided to leave and come back the following day.

Just as he made to turn away, another figure emerged from the gate. Duan Ling froze on the spot, shocked beyond belief.

Lang Junxia's voice rang out. "Where is he?"

Duan Ling had never seen Lang Junxia dressed as an official. This version of Lang Junxia, attired in a splendid set of rich, dark red robes with black accents, was someone Duan Ling barely recognized. In a pair of black military boots and a black hat with dangling red strings, he stood as tall and striking as ever with his broad shoulders and cinched waist. His lips were glossy, his thick, dark eyebrows stark on his lean face. His three-foot-long blade, Chilling Edge, hung sheathed at his waist. He was like a flawless, untouchable piece of cut jade.

On that fateful day in Qionghua House, Lang Junxia had been drenched to the skin. Duan Ling felt a powerful urge to run up and hug him tightly. But he was still nervous over their last encounter; he ducked behind the chests again, not daring to approach. After he'd fled the night the Mongols ravaged the city, he'd pondered long and hard over why Lang Junxia had wanted to take him away, and why he hadn't said anything. Was he the traitor Yelü Dashi had mentioned? Duan Ling stubbornly believed it wasn't possible, if for no other reason than the look Lang Junxia had given him that day.

"Duan Ling?" Lang Junxia called once more, turning toward the stack of chests where Duan Ling was hiding.

His heart pounded. Lang Junxia searched for him briefly, then asked the guard, who—although he looked clueless—replied with the utmost respect. Lang Junxia now wore prayer beads on his wrist, and a jade pendant hung at his waist; he'd changed his belt over to one with a golden buckle. His martial robes, embroidered with tigers and clouds, gleamed in the slanted light of the setting sun.

Beautiful, Duan Ling thought. When Lang Junxia had lived with him before, he'd always worn green robes. Duan Ling had never thought to imagine him in an official's uniform.

"Duan Ling!" Lang Junxia cried, as if sensing Duan Ling's eyes on him. "Come out! I know you're there. Trust me!"

Despite his uneasy feeling, Duan Ling rose just as Lang Junxia glanced in his direction. Their eyes met.

Immediately, Duan Ling's eyes stung. Lang Junxia stepped forward, and Duan Ling instinctively stepped back. In a few quick strides, Lang Junxia closed the distance, grabbed his hand, and wrapped him in a fierce hug.

"Lang Junxia…" Duan Ling said thickly.

Lang Junxia closed his eyes and expelled a heavy sigh, as if depleted of a lifetime of strength. Duan Ling hugged him back, suddenly recalling the night Lang Junxia had rushed back to retrieve him while injured in the snow. Back then, his body had also weighed heavily on Duan Ling like this.

Without another word to the guards, Lang Junxia led him away from the gate to a house within the city.

Duan Ling watched him nervously as he closed the house's gate behind them. He'd said nothing on the way. If Lang Junxia really wanted to kill him, Duan Ling knew he wouldn't be able to escape. But then again, many things in life were predetermined—with that in mind, he felt much calmer.

"Is this where you live now?" Duan Ling asked.

"His Majesty gifted this house to me. I mostly live in the palace."

"Where's my dad?" Duan Ling asked.

"Still out searching for you," Lang Junxia told him. "He only came back to the capital once last month, for just a few days."

"Write him a letter and tell him I made it here," Duan Ling urged.

"When the guards said a young man had come with a bone dagger, I knew it had to be you. I already dispatched a secret envoy. As it stands, Mu Kuangda controls the court and the people; no one can stand against him. Until His Majesty returns, you mustn't reveal yourself to the court."

Duan Ling nodded.

"Go wash up," Lang Junxia said. "I'll tell you everything after dinner."

The house was decorated lavishly, but seemingly barren of people. Lang Junxia guided him to a small side courtyard to clean himself. As Duan Ling soaked in the bath, he finally began to relax. He had so many questions, yet no idea where to start.

Lang Junxia knocked on the gate before letting himself in. Just as they'd done when he was little, Duan Ling sat patiently in the bathtub while Lang Junxia rolled up his sleeves and leaned forward to wash his hair.

"Dinner's almost ready," he told Duan Ling.

"That day, you—"

"That day, I went to Shangjing on Prime Minister Mu's orders to kill you and bring your head for His Highness the fourth prince as a gift," Lang Junxia explained matter-of-factly as he scrubbed Duan Ling's hair. "I didn't explain anything because I suspected Mu Kuangda had a spy in Shangjing. For a while, I thought it was Xunchun. I didn't dare ask for an audience with His Highness, so I decided to act on my own and take you into hiding, to keep you from being held hostage."

Lang Junxia retrieved something from the pouch hanging at his waist: the glittering, translucent jade arc. He looped the pouch around Duan Ling's neck. Shocked, Duan Ling asked, "Where…did you find this?"

"The herb village," Lang Junxia said. "Don't lose it again. I thought you'd died. I didn't dare hand it over to His Majesty and extinguish his hopes. But, thankfully, heaven has blessed our Great Chen. You survived."

"Xunchun never betrayed me," Duan Ling said. "She got us out of the city safely—she gave up her life for me."

Lang Junxia lapsed into silence while Duan Ling finished his bath. As Duan Ling rose from the tub, he suddenly felt a little shy.

"You've grown," Lang Junxia said.

He wrapped Duan Ling in a new robe and told him to wear it. Then, just as he had when Duan Ling was small, Lang Junxia took his hand and led him down the corridor into the main hall, where he'd prepared a few simple dishes for their dinner. As soon as Duan Ling sat down, he picked up his chopsticks and set upon the meal.

“When His Majesty returns, I’ll tell him to meet you here,” Lang Junxia said. “The situation at court is unstable right now; we mustn’t rush things. We should take our time planning next steps.”

“Why?” asked Duan Ling.

A brief pause. “The fourth prince has no heirs,” Lang Junxia explained. “When he married Mu Kuangda’s younger sister, the court had hoped Mu Jinzhi would bear him children, but none have come. If it weren’t for you, the Mu clan would have full control over the emperor.”

“But there’s no way Dad would—”

“He refuses to return,” Lang Junxia said. “He declared that until he finds you, he won’t come back to Xichuan. He already lost Xiaowan. He can’t bear to lose you too.”

Duan Ling didn’t know what to say. He stared at Lang Junxia in quiet helplessness, like an anguished child.

“You met my mom before, didn’t you?” he said a moment later.

Lang Junxia didn’t reply. He only sipped his wine.

Duan Ling felt a painful twist in his stomach; his head began to swim. “Lang Junxia,” he said. “My stomach hurts.”

As Lang Junxia stared back at him with calm vacancy, it finally dawned on Duan Ling why he was in pain. They held each other’s gazes as the cramping in Duan Ling’s stomach got worse and worse, until he bit down hard on his lip and knitted his brows. His skin prickled as if he’d been doused in icy water, and his thoughts blurred. He opened his mouth but no sound came out; after an agonized moment, his eyes fluttered closed, and he slumped over the table. The last thing he saw as the world went dark was that the hand Lang Junxia reached out to place over his own was missing its little finger.

Who hurt you? he thought—and then he could think no more.

Lang Junxia gently grasped Duan Ling’s still hand. Cai Yan, who had been waiting outside in the corridor, spoke from behind the window screen.

“See?” he said softly. “He didn’t even ask about me. He probably thinks I’m dead.”

“Don’t you want to see him?” Lang Junxia asked.

Cai Yan remained silent; he made no move to enter the room.

After a moment, Lang Junxia reached out, lifted the jade arc from around Duan Ling’s neck, and placed it on the table. Then he stepped forward and scooped Duan Ling up in his arms. As he walked out the main doors, Cai Yan vanished around the end of the corridor, hiding himself away. Duan Ling’s hand hung limply at his side. His freshly washed skin was clean, and his hair was loose. His eyes were tightly shut, as if he was in a deep sleep.

Lang Junxia carried him down the corridor to the back courtyard, then lowered him into the bed of a cart. Leaning over Duan Ling, he stripped off the boy’s outer layers so he was clad only in his underrobe before stroking his forehead once.

Minutes later, Lang Junxia cracked the whip, and the cart rolled out of the back courtyard, headed for the city gate.

Standing behind the lattice of the second-floor window, Cai Yan held the jade arc, staring out at the city in silence.

Peach blossoms swirled in the dark. The cart came to a stop alongside the Min River, whose rolling waves rushed far away into the east. Lang Junxia picked Duan Ling up from the cart and carried him by moonlight to the edge of a cliff overhanging the waters.

Flower petals fluttered behind him, catching the silver light before scattering on the winds.

He cradled Duan Ling in his arms just like the day he’d brought him out of Runan, out of death and into warm spring. Now he carried him out of a warm spring night and back into an unending darkness. The slow and melodious song of a flute played as he seemed to carry Duan Ling out of a battlefield into a paradise of peach trees, out of the sandy winds of the desert into the lushness of Jiangnan.

Life is but a fleeting dream; how brief our happy moments seem.[1]

All that was once living would descend into an eternal slumber.

Duan Ling’s limp body plummeted from the cliff into the dark waters of the Min River with a splash, where it was dragged beneath the eddying

waves.

Chapter 42

LATER IN THE NIGHT, a carriage stopped outside the palace gates. A guard pulled aside the curtain, and Cai Yan stepped out.

"Your Highness," the guard hailed him.

Cai Yan tied the jade arc onto his belt as he strode forward.

"Wuluohou Mu drove a cart to the river and threw in a corpse," the guard murmured under his breath.

"Did he stop on the way?"

The guard shook his head, and Cai Yan nodded acknowledgment.

Another guard approached. "His Majesty has woken up and is looking for you."

"When Wuluohou Mu returns to the palace, tell him to sleep. No need to come and see me."

Cai Yan disappeared into the darkness of the palace, on his way to see the emperor.

The following day, on the rocky beach of one of the Min River's tributaries, the sound of hoofbeats came from afar. A girl wearing men's attire approached on horseback, her robes flapping in the wind. Two hounds ran along the banks before her, stopping to sniff around a body that had washed ashore on the pebbled riverside. The girl peered suspiciously toward the reeds.

The hounds barked as they nosed at Duan Ling's face.

Another man came speeding on horseback, crying, "Your Highness!"

The girl was the daughter of Princess Duanping and the Marquis of Huaiyin: Commandery Princess Congping, Yao Zheng. She'd seized her chance to leave the city that day, and had dressed in men's robes to ride her horse along the Min River and the mountain roads. When her two beloved

hounds had dashed away across the hills and out of sight, Yao Zheng had chased them to a cluster of reeds by the rocky shore.

The man calling to her was dressed entirely in black, the tails of his belt fluttering in the wind. As he spurred his horse after her, he squinted against the sun's glare.

"Your Highness," Wu Du said helplessly. "These roads are difficult to travel, and there are snakes here in spring. It isn't safe. Let's go back."

"Who are you to tell me what to do?" Yao Zheng retorted. "If you're so worried, go back on your own!"

Seeing that they were alone on the rocky shores, with the sun bright overhead and the flowers in full bloom, Wu Du got off his horse. After looking around and seeing no sign of snakes or other venomous creatures, he nodded acquiescence and posted himself by the riverbank with hands tucked into his sleeves.

Yao Zheng clicked her tongue in annoyance. Squashing his anger, Wu Du knit his brows and looked around again. The hounds were barking at something in the tall reeds. He walked closer, and Yao Zheng dismounted to stand by the riverbank, an indiscernible expression on her face.

"Your Highness," Wu Du said over his shoulder. "Don't get too close to the water. The currents here are unpredictable."

As Yao Zheng stubbornly ignored him, Wu Du stumbled over Duan Ling's battered body among the reeds and pebbles.

Apparently having had her fill of standing alone at the riverbank, Yao Zheng stalked back toward Wu Du, whereupon she, too, caught sight of Duan Ling. "Oh? How did a body get here?"

Wu Du dropped to one knee and placed a finger under Duan Ling's nose, feeling no breath. "Who is this kid? He doesn't seem to have any fatal injuries."

"He's dead," Yao Zheng said decisively.

Wu Du pressed his fingers to the pulse point in Duan Ling's neck.

"Let's go," Yao Zheng commanded.

"Wait."

“If you don’t go back with me, your master will scold you again,” Yao Zheng taunted him.

Wu Du shot her a look, biting his tongue before he could say something equally cutting. Just then, Duan Ling’s pulse gave a slight, thready beat under his skin.

Wu Du’s brows drew together. “Has he been poisoned?” he muttered.

“Hey, Wu Du,” Yao Zheng said. “I heard your poison can kill someone or bring them back to life. Why don’t you show me? If you can save him, I’ll put in a good word with my dad. You can ask for anything you want.”

“I’m a man of integrity,” Wu Du said. “There’s nothing I want. And I’ve always been truthful with the Marquis of Huaiyin.” He remained crouched beside Duan Ling, perplexed. He took a small ceramic bottle from his medicinal pouch, opened it, and shook out a single pill.

“Can you really bring him back to life?” Yao Zheng asked in disbelief, thinking Wu Du was irrationally stubborn.

Wu Du ignored her and crushed up the pill, feeding it to Duan Ling and massaging his throat to help him swallow. He rose to his feet and asked, “But if he does come back to life, will the bet still count?”

Yao Zheng cocked a brow and observed him for a moment. She crossed the rocky beach, climbed onto her horse, and stared across the river. “Of course. I keep my word.”

Wu Du’s face twisted at the mocking undertone beneath her words.

“Look,” he said, “he’s breathing already.”

“Sure,” Yao Zheng said dismissively. She found Wu Du remarkably like a sandbag: utterly boring, never yelling at her, never fighting back, and barely even speaking on their ride. “I’m going to get Wuluohou Mu to keep me company instead. No need to follow me around anymore.”

“Wait—” Wu Du stepped toward her, but Yao Zheng was already spurring her horse down the mountain road like a gust of wind. The two hounds barked at him before chasing after Yao Zheng, as if even dogs delighted in his misery.

Spring blossoms fluttered through Xichuan’s imperial palace. Cai Yan stood outside the main hall, enjoying the breeze as he waited for Li Yanqiu to wash up and rinse his mouth.

Inside the hall, Li Yanqiu asked, “Has the crown prince arrived?”

“Your Majesty,” said a palace maid. “His Highness the crown prince has been waiting outside the whole night.”

“Send him in.”

Cai Yan stepped in and came forward to attend to him. “Last night, when I came back to the palace, Uncle was asleep again,” he said. “Have you not been resting well these days?”

“I had a dream,” said Li Yanqiu, “that made me think of you. I felt restless and wanted to see you with my own eyes.”

Attendants busied themselves throughout the hall. Li Yanqiu placed a hand on the table, and the palace maids and eunuchs slid his rings onto his fingers. Cai Yan retrieved the jade arc matching his own from a wooden box, knelt down, and carefully attached it to Li Yanqiu’s belt.

“I dreamed of the day you came back.” Li Yanqiu gave him a warm smile. “I couldn’t even see what you looked like at first, just a vague figure.

I was so anxious.”

His smile was tinged with sadness. Cai Yan didn’t smile at all; his eyes were filled with sorrow.

A palace maid presented a tray with a bowl of herbal medicine, arms held respectfully over her head as she bowed.

Li Yanqiu took the medicine and drank it with nary a glance her way.

“I also slept poorly last night,” Cai Yan said. “I dreamed of my father.”

“Perhaps he came to you in your dreams,” Li Yanqiu sighed. “He hasn’t come to mine for some time now. He must still blame me.”

“Please don’t think that way, Uncle. He would never blame you.”

“Either way.” Li Yanqiu dismissed the subject, then changed his tone to prod with a smile: “And did your cousin come looking for you?”

Cai Yan shook his head.

“Send a messenger to summon the commandery princess here for lunch,” Li Yanqiu ordered the guards.

Yao Zheng hadn’t changed from her men’s robes when she returned that afternoon, coming to greet Li Yanqiu and Cai Yan in road-muddy boots. Cai Yan was lightheaded from his fitful sleep the night before.

“Hey, Rong,” she said. “Where’s Wuluohou Mu?”

“I went for a stroll last night when I couldn’t sleep. He insisted on coming with me, so I dismissed him to rest for the day. Shall I summon him to accompany you on your merry travels?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Yao Zheng declared. “But I’ll tell you if I do. I’m planning to take a trip to Mount Wenzhong. Wanna come?”

“No, I have memorials to review.”

Yao Zheng sighed in exasperation.

“When will your father send someone to escort you back?” Li Yanqiu asked Yao Zheng.

“Well, I was thinking… What if I just stay here?”

“Perfect,” Li Yanqiu said. “Then I can find you a match while you’re with us.”

Yao Zheng’s expression soured. She thought for a moment, then laughed awkwardly. “Well, um, Uncle, uh…”

“You ran away from home because your father wanted to marry you off, but if you come to me, you’ll be married off all the same. Decide for yourself who will choose.”

Yao Zheng pressed her lips shut. Head ducked, she picked at the food with her chopsticks. A palace guard outside announced Wuluohou Mu’s arrival, and Cai Yan instructed him to wait outside. Li Yanqiu sent the servants to direct him to the side hall and offer him food.

Soon, yet another guard came to announce: “Wu Du requests to see the commandery princess.”

“Send him away,” Li Yanqiu said lightly. “Why does he have so much business in the palace?”

The messenger left to dismiss Wu Du as instructed.

Wu Du hadn’t been given an entrance token for the imperial palace, so he waited outside the gate, holding the reins of a horse with a cloth-covered lump slung across its back. After he’d waited an entire hour, a guard came out and informed him that the commandery princess would not see him. Wu Du guided the horse away, traversing the streets back to his own home in a side courtyard of the prime minister’s residence.

The prime minister’s grand manor boasted four large walled sections, forty-eight courtyard houses, and more than a hundred halls. As such, many guests stayed there. In the furthest corner of the manor, Mu Kuangda had arranged a side courtyard with three halls, a yard, a stable, and a woodshed, which was now Wu Du’s place of residence.

After Li Jianhong had given his life to protect Shangjing, new factions had arisen among the officials in Xichuan. Wu Du had been ultimately recruited by Mu Kuangda, thus securing his living. Many ridiculed him as a turncoat, having first worked under Zhao Kui before briefly swearing loyalty to Li Jianhong and finally ending up as a freeloader

in Mu Kuangda's manor. Across the years, the names and deeds of the Four Great Assassins had spread throughout the land: Wuluohou Mu had performed a meritorious service by bringing the crown prince safely back to the capital; Zheng Yan had supposedly secluded himself in Huaiyin but in truth was the Marquis of Huaiyin's most trusted aide; Changliu-jun was still heavily favored by Mu Kuangda. Only Wu Du encountered misfortune time and time again, always returning from his missions in failure. He was like a stray dog—both his masters had died one after another, leaving the Mu clan his only option for refuge.

Mu Kuangda's other guests had cautioned him that Wu Du's very presence brought misfortune down on his masters and advised him against keeping someone who gave his loyalty so freely. Some even harbored suspicions that Wu Du himself had killed Li Jianhong. But despite these dissenting opinions, Mu Kuangda had merely smiled and accepted Wu Du's allegiance, giving him a place among his three thousand guests. In truth, as someone who knew too much of Zhao Kui's affairs, Wu Du either had to die or be taken in. It was inadvisable to throw such a person away entirely. He still held a title as one of the Four Great Assassins, though barely. He was of some use.

Even so, Mu Kuangda treated Wu Du as a high official for appearance's sake only; he almost never summoned him, as if he was merely an idle guest, and Changliu-jun's contempt for him grew by the day. Thus, while staying in the prime minister's manor, Wu Du found himself at loose ends.

Changliu-jun had initially warned Mu Kuangda that Wu Du was likely a spy, and that one day he would take revenge on behalf of Zhao Kui—but this, Mu Kuangda had immediately refuted.

"Not possible," he had said. "The reason Wu Du was never a match for you or the other assassins is because he's a muddled fool who has no idea what he wants."

After giving it some thought, Changliu-jun concluded he was right. A man like Wu Du was seldom so persistent, and his martial arts were, in his opinion, unremarkable. Changliu-jun put the matter from his mind.

At first Wu Du's side courtyard still had a few servants tending to it, but once they saw he was ignored by the Mu clan, they began to slack in

their duties. Eventually Wu Du had exploded with rage and driven them away, so when he arrived back at the courtyard, no one was there to see what—or whom—he'd brought back. Wu Du removed the cloth from his horse's limp passenger, hauled Duan Ling off its back, and laid him on the ground of the courtyard. He ladled a bowl of strong wine and splashed it onto Duan Ling's face. Duan Ling gasped desperately for air but didn't open his eyes. Wu Du had just begun to look for something else when a messenger arrived at the door to announce that the prime minister had summoned him.

Wu Du had no choice but to go, leaving Duan Ling unconscious on the floor.

Chapter 43

WHEN WU DU ARRIVED, he found Mu Kuangda steepingtea. Changliu-jun sat at a low table beside him, takinghis lunch with his mask laid by his elbow. The piercing eyes of the tiger tattoo on his face stared Wu Du down.

“I gave you orders to accompany Yao Zheng on her excursion, so tell me: How did you manage to lose her and come back alone?” Mu Kuangda asked, sighing.

“She was the one who left me. She said I was too lowly to be in her company.”

Mu Kuangda placed the freshly brewed cup of tea on the edge of the table, and Wu Du—a hint of trepidation in his eyes—stepped forward, picked it up, and took a sip.

“Wu Du,” he said, taking on a lecturing tone. “A name is something you must earn for yourself.”

“Yes,” Wu Du agreed in a small and humiliated voice, not knowing what else to say.

Mu Kuangda at first seemed ready to leave it at that, but continued after a moment of consideration, “If you don’t know how to properly entertain a girl, then learn. Your problem is that you can’t let go of that mulish attitude of yours. I asked you to kill a target, and you wouldn’t—so I asked you to entertain the commandery princess, and you wouldn’t do that either. What *do* you want to do? You tell me.”

“I’ll do whatever you ask,” Wu Du said respectfully.

Changliu-jun burst out laughing.

Wu Du kept his eyes fixed on the cup of tea.

“Take a look at this prescription.” Mu Kuangda handed him a slip of paper. “Brew this medicine and report its effects to me within a month.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.” Wu Du acquiesced quickly, nodding.

“If you can’t figure it out, find someone to test it on,” Mu Kuangda added.

Seeing he had no more instructions, Wu Du rose and took a step back.

“The tea,” Changliu-jun reminded him.

What else could he do but step forward again and finish drinking the tea the prime minister had so graciously bestowed upon him? After bowing respectfully to Mu Kuangda and offering a curt nod to Changliu-jun, he returned home.

Duan Ling was still lying on the ground in the courtyard. He’d woken at some point but kept silent for fear he’d be killed. The gate banged shut—someone had returned.

Wu Du, stewing in humiliation, entered and kicked over the medicine table. He blew out a long breath and sat down on the threshold, staring up at the clear blue sky. After another long moment, he stalked over to Duan Ling and yanked him upright by his hair, then tossed him down again. Duan Ling had no choice but to open his eyes; he gazed up at Wu Du in fear.

Spotting the tiger tattoo on the side of Wu Du’s neck, Duan Ling recognized this man almost immediately. Memories flooded back: the snowstorm in Shangjing, the golden centipede curled into a ball… This time, there’d be no escape.

“What’s your name?” Wu Du asked with a sneer.

Duan Ling opened his mouth to speak, but no sound emerged.

Frowning, Wu Du watched him with open hostility. As if a thought suddenly occurred to him, he asked: “Where are you from?”

Duan Ling wouldn’t have dared reply even if he could, but Wu Du’s questions had told him something important: Wu Du hadn’t recognized him. He was safe, at least for now. The first time he’d met Wu Du was within the apothecary in Shangjing. The lights had been dim, and the sky had been covered in swirling snow; Duan Ling had been only eight years old, just two eyes peeking over the edge of a counter to meet Wu Du’s gaze. After that, Wu Du had never seen him clearly again.

“Are you mute?” Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling huddled in a corner of the courtyard, pretending to be too scared to look Wu Du in the eye.

Wu Du watched him, increasingly confused. “Well, if you’re not, then say something.”

He shook his head again. This time, though Duan Ling intended to speak when he opened his mouth, he found he couldn’t. The shape of the words still formed on his tongue, but he had no control of his vocal cords and could only force out a low “Ah.”

So he *was* mute. Wu Du’s brow furrowed slightly. Something wasn’t right, but he couldn’t put his finger on what. After another moment of thought, he turned and went inside.

Duan Ling cautiously tracked his movements, only letting his guard down a little when he saw that Wu Du’s attention had gone elsewhere. *What is this place?* he wondered. He retraced everything that had happened, his head throbbing. He’d arrived in Xichuan and found Lang Junxia; they’d drunk wine together, but Lang Junxia had poisoned his wine and his food…

Glancing down at his still-damp clothes, Duan Ling noticed his fingers were wrinkled from soaking in the water. Had Lang Junxia wanted to kill him? Yes, at least in those last few moments together, he’d sensed intent. But why hadn’t he died? Why, instead, was he here—having been saved by Wu Du?

In the afternoon, Wu Du napped, and on waking came back to the courtyard to make sure Duan Ling hadn’t run off. He was still there, curled into a ball and sleepily hugging his knees like an abandoned puppy.

Wu Du tossed two flatbreads to the ground and ladled out a bowl of water, which he placed before Duan Ling. “Eat.”

Duan Ling looked at Wu Du for a long moment, afraid to touch the food and drink. Wu Du turned and went back inside. Duan Ling watched him from the ground as he examined a prescription side by side against a book; it seemed he had no time to spare for his strange guest. At last hunger overtook his reservations, and Duan Ling picked up a flatbread and took a bite.

Pain spiked in his throat when he swallowed. Duan Ling again tried to speak, softly, only to discover that the poison truly had rendered him

mute.

Why did Lang Junxia want to kill me? Is he working for Mu Kuangda? While Duan Ling felt far from safe in this courtyard, if Lang Junxia learned he was still alive, he would surely find a way to correct his mistake. If Duan Ling wanted to live, he needed to get out of Xichuan as fast as possible—but where was his father? He must be somewhere, yet Duan Ling had failed to unearth any news of him. Knowing Li Jianhong, it would be no surprise if he was staying away from the capital, riding astride Skychaser with sword in hand, roaming the lands in search of his son. When, then, would they be able to reunite?

Two roads diverged before Duan Ling.

He could escape as soon as possible, ideally before Wu Du had the chance to discover his identity, and continue searching for Li Jianhong. Or he could stay in the city temporarily but take extreme care with his every move. Most likely, only Lang Junxia knew who he was; the Mu clan, Wu Du, and everyone else had absolutely no idea. This path was, unexpectedly, the safer option: If he stayed with Wu Du, he could quietly wait for Li Jianhong to return to Xichuan, so long as Lang Junxia didn't find out he was here.

Thus Duan Ling made up his mind to stay and observe the situation.

Wu Du spent the whole afternoon poring over the prescription and giving himself a headache. Taking a brief break, he walked into the courtyard with a loosened noose in hand, paused momentarily, and threw it over Duan Ling's head, pulling the knot ruthlessly tight. Duan Ling's face went hot with panic; he yanked at the rope, trying to loosen the strangling knot. Wu Du must be trying to kill him. But Wu Du simply tied the other end of the rope around the handle of the woodshed without a word, leashing Duan Ling like a dog.

Then he left.

The rope was only long enough for Duan Ling to reach the toilet and the woodshed. Just like that, he was kept in Wu Du's household like a pet.

When night fell, Wu Du returned with an annoyed expression and threw some more food in Duan Ling's direction. Duan Ling ate. Inside, the

lamps in Wu Du's room flared to life, casting his silhouette on the paper windows.

Later that night, Wu Du came out to check on him, only to discover Duan Ling was no longer in the courtyard. One end of the rope was still tied to the handle of the woodshed, but the rest of it now looped inside.

It seemed the mute young man had found himself a place to sleep.

Wu Du unexpectedly found this amusing. Shaking his head, he shut his own door and went to bed. Within the woodshed, Duan Ling tried to remove the noose around his neck, but the rope was made of cow sinew and pulled far too tight. Try as he might, he couldn't budge the knot and was forced to sleep in great discomfort.

Memories of Lang Junxia and the simple dinner dishes from his table still swirled in Duan Ling's head. Yet when he organized his thoughts, his heart held no anger, only grief. Was this pain from his father being right about Lang Junxia, or from Lang Junxia betraying his trust? He didn't know.

That night, as Duan Ling lay on the cold, hard floor of the woodshed, he had a dream.

In the dream, he awoke within the splendid imperial palace and called from his bed, "Dad!"

A guard stepped forward. "Your Highness, His Majesty is holding morning court. I will send someone to let him know you're up."

Duan Ling didn't wait long, lying in his comfortable palace bed, before Li Jianhong walked in, smiling, in his fitted court robes.

"Awake now?" he asked, settling on the edge of Duan Ling's bed.

Duan Ling mumbled, wanting to laze around a while longer, so Li Jianhong lay down in bed with his son without changing his fine robes. He ordered the servants on the other side of the canopy to pick some peach blossom branches and arrange them in a vase for the crown prince's pleasure.

It was as if Duan Ling was a child again, his head pillowed on Li Jianhong's shoulder as he fiddled with the jade arc hanging from his

father’s belt. The sun’s warm rays filtered through the bed canopy, playing over Duan Ling’s face.

He opened his eyes.

Where the bed canopy had been, there was only a crack in the roof of the woodshed. Flecks of dust drifted through a sunbeam. The hard floor was freezing beneath his back, and the smell of firewood and charcoal lingered on his body. He crawled out of the woodshed into the courtyard, where the birds chirped in the crisp morning at the prime minister’s manor. Wu Du’s doors were still closed.

After spending a whole night in the noose, the skin of Duan Ling’s neck was rubbed raw. He fetched some water at the well, washing his face and neck and rinsing the sour stench from his body.

Hearing noise from the courtyard, Wu Du became suspicious. He stood just inside the doorway in his white underrobe, peering outside as Duan Ling finished washing himself then poured the leftover water over the flowerbeds. The rope restricted his movements; some remained out of reach and unwatered. Having finished his morning ablutions, Duan Ling fetched another bucket of water, placed it in the center of the courtyard, and nudged it forward. Wu Du realized this freshly drawn water was for him.

Duan Ling settled down beside the flowerbed, leaned against the wall of the courtyard, and gazed up at the clear indigo sky.

Wu Du hurriedly washed his face and changed his robes before leaving the house.

After watching him go, Duan Ling considered what he should do next. He’d finally calmed down some after these unexpected developments. If Lang Junxia’s actions were anything to go by, Mu Kuangda intensely feared Duan Ling’s existence. His immediate priority was to keep his life—and there was a long way to go yet.

Days passed in this fashion, with Wu Du leaving in the morning and coming back in a huff at midday. In the afternoon, he would cut up medicinal herbs and decoct them. After several such days, Wu Du entered the courtyard with a bowl of medicine and ordered Duan Ling: “Open up.”

Duan Ling obeyed, and Wu Du poured the contents of the bowl into his mouth. The second they hit his throat, Duan Ling felt a searing pain. He collapsed forward, dry heaving beside the wall while Wu Du observed his reactions, snorting in disdain. Duan Ling's insides churned with cramping agony, and he soon listed to the side, vomiting into the flowerbed.

At this point, Wu Du noticed the rope had worn a raw wound into the skin of Duan Ling's neck. He ducked inside and returned with a sword in hand, slicing carelessly at the rope around Duan Ling's neck. Duan Ling flinched on instinct, but the blade snipped through the rope in a flash.

After another bout of vomiting, Duan Ling lay on the ground, completely spent and as limp as a dead dog. Wu Du dragged a chair over and took up a seat beside him.

"Who poisoned you, before?" he asked coldly. He studied Duan Ling's slowly dilating pupils. "Can you write?"

Duan Ling twitched his fingers. Wu Du wedged a stick of charcoal between them, but Duan Ling was shaking so badly he couldn't get a good grip; the stick of charcoal slipped from his hand. Wu Du's voice faded in and out of his ears. Finally he heard him say, "It looks like you were given Nirvana's Calling. It's a fairly rare poison. Who holds such a deep grudge against you and your family?"

Duan Ling's senses slowly returned. He opened his mouth but only produced nonsensical groaning noises. Wu Du watched him a while longer. "The poison has yet to be fully expelled. We'll leave it at this for now."

At that moment, a visitor arrived in the courtyard: Changliu-jun.

"What's all this?" he said, looking askance at the slumped Duan Ling.

"My test subject," said Wu Du. "For medicine."

Changliu-jun immediately lost interest. "Prime Minister Mu wants you," he said.

The summons forced Wu Du to his feet, and he left Duan Ling alone in the courtyard. Duan Ling's insides twisted in knots, but after purging everything in his stomach from both ends, he felt much better.

When Wu Du came back in the evening, he saw that Duan Ling had not only cleaned up his mess, he'd even tilled the flowerbeds. Wu Du planted a bit of snakeroot he'd brought back with him in the freshly turned soil. Duan Ling watched him in silence until Wu Du moved to water the new planting. He waved his hands, trying to convey that it shouldn't be watered right away. Wu Du glowered at him with suspicion. Duan Ling continued to gesture at himself—*let me do it*—until Wu Du kicked him aside and poured half a bowl of water onto the soil.

A few days later, the leaves of the snakeroot turned yellow, and it died from overwatering.

When Wu Du pulled it out and found the roots rotten, he had to slink back to Mu Kuangda and send for another stem to be dug up. This time, when he arrived home with it, he threw the snakeroot at Duan Ling. Duan Ling scooped some soil from the flowerbed into his own drinking bowl and planted the herb there, then splashed some water onto its leaves with his fingers before setting it in a cool, shaded corner.

"Are you a gardener?" Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling looked up at him. Since he'd found this young man on the shores of the Min River's tributary, Wu Du had assumed he must have fallen in somewhere upstream of Xichuan. Perhaps his father had been a farmer or a gardener. This was a stroke of luck—his skills could save Wu Du a lot of trouble.

Chapter 44

WU DU GAVE DUAN LING another bowl to replacehis old one and kept him fed with two meals a day.He bade Duan Ling sit on the steps of the gates with his bowl to eat, and Duan Ling obediently sat, always washing his bowl and chopsticks once finished. Wu Du found this surprisingly entertaining, like he was training a dog. When he peeked inside the woodshed one day, he found it had been tidied up as if it were a bedroom, with Duan Ling's bowl and chopsticks set neatly aside.

Duan Ling ate, but he never felt full. At fifteen, his body had hit its growth spurt—and with only half a bowl of rice and some vegetables at each meal, he was hungry constantly. Regardless, he didn't have the guts to steal more food. Sometimes when Wu Du was in a foul mood, he would lose his appetite after eating only a little, then come out and dump the leftover rice and vegetables into Duan Ling's bowl. Afterward, Wu Du would toss his dirty dishes into the wooden wash bucket; by the time he turned around, Duan Ling would have finished everything.

"You eat so much," he observed.

An amusing thought occurred to him then. Curious as to just how much this boy could eat, he gave him a larger portion than usual. Duan Ling cleaned his bowl, so Wu Du added more. Duan Ling cleaned it again. Wu Du gave him a few flatbreads, and Duan Ling ate those too. By the time Wu Du gave him two more steamed buns, Duan Ling had finally reached the point where he couldn't fit another morsel in his stomach; he swallowed his last bite with difficulty. Wu Du found the sight hilarious. Duan Ling took the steamed buns and stowed them away in the woodshed for when he inevitably grew hungry again.

Wu Du burst out laughing, and Duan Ling couldn't help but laugh along at the sorry sight he must make.

As quickly as he started, Wu Du stopped laughing. He suddenly ached for this young mute who lived a life worse than a stray dog's—much like himself.

When Wu Du tossed Duan Ling a robe he no longer wanted, Duan Ling picked it up assuming he was meant to do the laundry. He scrubbed, washed, and folded the robe before placing it at Wu Du's doorway the next day.

"It's for you," Wu Du said, eyeing him strangely.

Duan Ling nodded slightly and took back the robe.

Slowly but steadily, Wu Du grew attached to his new pet. Though this dog of his wasn't particularly clingy, when Wu Du returned home every day to see him busily tending the flowerbeds, he was overcome by a feeling he couldn't quite name. Outside his home he was mocked by all, but within these walls, he found himself at ease. Sometimes, if his tasks kept him out past dinnertime, Wu Du remembered he hadn't fed his puppy back home and thought he must be getting hungry.

"How old are you?" he asked one day as Duan Ling tended to the rare herbs Wu Du had planted in his flowerbeds.

Duan Ling turned and held up the index finger on his left hand while spreading all five fingers on his right, palm down: fifteen. He knew Wu Du would eventually become curious and had planned a story to give him. Raising Wu Du's suspicions again would only put Duan Ling in danger.

But as Wu Du continued watching him, he felt camaraderie with this fellow sufferer. Rapping his knuckles on the low table, he told Duan Ling, "Drink this medicine."

Duan Ling laid down his trowel and approached the doorway, but seemed hesitant to enter. Wu Du sat alone at the table, a stray beam of sunlight falling over his face. "Come in."

Duan Ling crossed the threshold and drank the medicine. His throat felt as if it was being pricked by thousands of needles; it was suddenly, unbearably itchy. He staggered back outside, clutching at his throat as he tried to shout.

"Go ahead and scream," Wu Du said coolly. "Keep yelling, and your voice will come back."

Between sputtering coughs, Duan Ling yelled, his voice coming out grainy and hoarse while he writhed on the ground in the courtyard.

“Is it really that bad?” Wu Du asked, exasperated by his theatrics.

He returned to flipping through his copy of *Fundamentals of Medicine* in silence. By the time evening fell, Duan Ling had regained his voice.

“Ah, ah,” he cried wordlessly.

Wu Du emerged from the hall with Duan Ling’s dinner in hand. “Speak,” he ordered.

“Ah,” Duan Ling croaked.

“Say ‘I.’”

“I… I.” Duan Ling’s voice was still recovering.

“Eat.”

Duan Ling lowered his head to eat, and Wu Du kicked at him impatiently.

“Say ‘eat,’” he ordered.

The food flew from Duan Ling’s mouth as he coughed. He lifted his head to gaze at Wu Du. “E-eat.”

“Now say, ‘sticks are long and stack upon a stool that racks up sticks.’”

Duan Ling stared at him in disbelief. He began stuttering out, “S-sticks are long…”

Wu Du pointed and laughed until his eyes filled with tears. Tears welled in Duan Ling’s eyes, too, as he nodded at Wu Du, wondering whether or not he should kowtow in gratitude. But Wu Du paid him no further mind, going inside to retrieve his own dinner.

“What’s your name? Where are you from?” Wu Du asked off-handedly once he’d returned and settled at his table. His mood seemed rather good as they sat eating dinner together.

My name is Duan Ling, and my father is Duan Sheng.… The familiar words rose in Duan Ling’s mind. Then another set of words came: *My name is Li Ruo. My dad is Li Jianhong, the emperor of Southern Chen.*

“Wang…Shan,” Duan Ling said instead.

He didn’t dare tell Wu Du that he was Li Ruo, and he also didn’t dare call himself Duan Ling. If the Mu clan happened to know either of those names, he would be inviting disaster upon himself.

“Wang Xiao-Shan,” said Wu Du. “Where are you from?”

“Xunbei,” Duan Ling answered hoarsely.

“Xunbei?” Wu Du repeated, puzzled. “What’s a Xunbei native doing here?”

“M-my dad is an herb merchant. Robbed.”

His answer confirmed Wu Du’s earlier theory. “Where were you robbed?”

“Tong Pass.”

“You’re lucky to be alive,” Wu Du said.

Over the past month, Duan Ling had plotted a thoroughly detailed story: The city he’d named, Xunbei, spoke a dialect close to Xunyang, another place he’d passed through during his flight from Shangjing. Even if Wu Du went there to investigate, he wouldn’t find anything. According to Duan Ling’s story, after his mother died in the war, he and his father had left Xunbei to do business in Western Liang, intending to buy and sell herbs along the road to Xichuan. But amid the upheaval between Liao and Yuan, a group of bandits had robbed them. They’d kidnapped Duan Ling, forced him to swallow the poison, and then thrown him into the Min River where he drifted downstream with the current and—fortunately, it seemed—washed up outside Xichuan.

This tale was carefully concocted to dispel Wu Du’s lingering suspicions. The only remaining mystery was the poison itself.

“What kind of bandits did you encounter that would use Nirvana’s Calling on a kid?” he asked.

“I-I don’t know. D-Dad bought a secret prescription…in Western Liang.”

With this, Wu Du tucked his one last misgiving into the back of his mind, asking no more questions. Poisons came in many variations, but from his own understanding, Nirvana’s Calling was a rare and exorbitantly expensive one, extremely finicky to make. Wu Du asked a few more

questions, and Duan Ling called on his imagination and all his experience to round out his lies. He fabricated a market in Western Liang and told Wu Du he and his father had bought a box there with a mysterious poison inside. When they passed through a small town north of Tong Pass, they were targeted by some mountain bandits who ended up testing the poison in the box on the merchant's son.

At this point, Wu Du was sufficiently convinced. Although it was highly improbable, it was at least possible.

"A box from the Western Regions," Wu Du mused. "Did it have fretwork?"

Duan Ling made hand motions to him from the courtyard, indicating the size of the box.

After that Wu Du seemed to lose interest in the subject. "Do the laundry," he ordered.

With the moon hanging high in the sky, Duan Ling sat in the courtyard scrubbing clothes in the balmy summer night. Now that warm weather had returned, Wu Du sat shirtless with his legs propped on the table, wearing only a thin pair of knee-length silk pants. His body was strong, lean, and well-built.

"Look how dainty you are; anyone can see you must've been the apple of your parents' eye," Wu Du remarked casually. "Maybe I'll ask around for news of him. If I find him, I'll tell him to bring twenty taels and buy you back."

Duan Ling kept quiet as he carried on doing laundry, but a wet trail streaked down one cheek.

Late that night, a servant announced from outside the gates, "You have a visitor."

"Who is it?" Wu Du asked.

"He said his name is He."

"Invite Elder He inside," Wu Du said at once.

He threw on his robes and tidied up the messy hall in a flurry, while Duan Ling wiped his hands dry, ladled fresh water into the teapot, and placed it on the stove.

Their visitor was an elderly man with a trailing white beard.

“Shishu,”[2] Wu Du greeted him with a deep bow of respect. The elderly man cast Duan Ling a glance. “I found him in the mountains,” Wu Du explained in haste. “Shishu, please take a seat.”

“I brought the ingredients you wanted. They’re all listed here.” Elder He fished out a paper slip and a cloth bundle.

“I’m truly sorry to trouble Shishu to make a trip all this way,” Wu Du said in thanks.

“All is well,” Elder He said. “I was looking to take a stroll down the mountain anyway. This is the perfect chance to show you the poison I recently completed.”

Duan Ling, after ensuring the water was boiling for tea, went back out to continue with the laundry.

“This poison has no color or taste, and is virtually undetectable,” Elder He continued. “But it needs a catalyst to activate. Once the target ingests the catalyst, the poison will spread through the body and end their life.”

Wu Du did not open the packet of poison. He fell silent.

“Wu Du.” There was a note of admonishment in Elder He’s voice, the tone of an elder giving sage advice to the young. “There are some things in this world one cannot avoid.”

“I fear this is one mental hurdle I can’t get over.” Wu Du sat upright, sliding the packet back across the table. “Shifu[3] said poisons are not for taking a life.”

Elder He sat cross-legged, facing Wu Du across the low table. “That sickly man won’t last long,” he said, lifting the teacup to his lips and taking a sip. “Why must you always take the hard route? Back then, you chose the wrong side. You should have chosen the crown prince from the start.”

Duan Ling had been in the midst of hanging Wu Du’s underrobe to dry when these words stopped him in his tracks. His eyes grew wide under

the silver moonlight.

“The crown prince has Wuluohou Mu by his side,” Wu Du said. “He doesn’t want me. Besides, all of you were right, even the late emperor: I have the soft heart of a woman. I can’t accomplish great deeds. Be it General Zhao or the late emperor—I wasn’t able to avenge either of them.”

“You followed Zhao Kui for three years and Li Jianhong for less than ten days. It is not the same. Li Jianhong’s death does not fall on your shoulders.”

Duan Ling’s breathing stopped entire, and an uncontrollable trembling took hold of his body.

Wu Du took a contemplative sip of tea. “The late emperor said I never knew what I wanted, and he was right. I’m as lost as a floating clump of duckweed. Wherever the wind blows, I go with it. I followed General Zhao, and when he died, I chose to follow Li Jianhong. When Li Jianhong died, I changed masters again and followed Prime Minister Mu…”

When Li Jianhong died.… Everything else faded into a low, roaring din; no other words reached Duan Ling’s ears. He froze stock-stiff, as if a deadly poison had been injected into his bloodstream, surging through his veins. All his senses left him.

“All right, let me try this poison,” Wu Du said. He opened the packet; inside were a powder and a few tiny pills.

“The powder is the poison, and the pill is the catalyst,” Elder He explained. “If you take the powder followed by the pill, you’ll pass away in less than two hours.”

Elder He rose to leave. Wu Du slipped on his wooden clogs to accompany him through the courtyard, walking toward the main gates to see the elder off.

Chapter 45

WU DU RETURNED to the sight of Duan Ling kneelingbefore the low table, having just poured all the powderin the packet down his throat and in the midst of washing one of the pills down with the cold tea.

"Hey!" he shouted, sprinting across the courtyard.

Duan Ling had completely cleaned out the packet. Wu Du immediately dropped to one knee and tapped his acupoint to render him limp. He dragged Duan Ling face down over his leg, wedging his knee against his stomach and pressing down hard on his back.

"Ugh—" Duan Ling threw up the powder, the pill, and all the food he'd eaten for dinner. Wu Du made him vomit thrice, and when there seemed to be nothing left in him, slapped him hard across the face.

"What are you doing?!" he yelled.

He dumped Duan Ling on the floor and went in search of something to fully purge his stomach. The moment he turned his back, Duan Ling began groping through the filth on the floor for the pill he'd thrown up, bringing it back to his mouth. In the middle of his own search, Wu Du glanced over at Duan Ling and was back at his side like a gust of wind. He dragged Duan Ling up by the collar and slapped him another dozen times, until Duan Ling saw stars and—finally—fell unconscious.

With Duan Ling slumped over beside the table, Wu Du was able to find the stomach-purging medicine and blend it into a cup of tea. He tipped Duan Ling backward and forced the liquid down Duan Ling's throat via a reed pipe in his nose.

Soon after, Duan Ling awoke to the sensation of his stomach roiling and threw up again. Wu Du dragged him outside and tossed him down on the ground of the courtyard. As Duan Ling lay convulsing, Wu Du, incandescent with fury, threw the tea kettle at him, splashing his neck and back in hot water. Despite the pain, Duan Ling didn't move. He stared back at Wu Du in the doorway with wide, vacant eyes. His gaze was filled with despair, but for the life of him, Wu Du couldn't guess what had caused it.

He walked over to Duan Ling and kicked him, then grabbed his collar and hauled him off the ground a few inches to snap in his face: “What were you thinking?”

Duan Ling remained motionless, his eyes unfocused, as if staring at something far away. Irritated by his silence, Wu Du slapped him again. The crisp sound pierced the air, but Duan Ling showed no response. Yet as he watched, tears slowly welled up in Duan Ling’s round eyes, glossing his pupils with a sheen that reflected Wu Du’s own face back at him.

Befuddled, Wu Du dropped him and left him alone to clean up his rooms. He swept away the acrid mush Duan Ling had retched up, which included pieces of meat he’d wolfed down too quickly in his hunger the night before. Wu Du cast another glance at Duan Ling. He was lying completely motionless in the courtyard, as still as a corpse.

Frowning, Wu Du tossed aside the broom and dropped down onto his stomach with his head turned toward Duan Ling, putting their eyes on the same level. The ground was damp. Tears trailed from the corners of Duan Ling’s eyes, gathering in tiny pools that reflected the Milky Way streaking across the sky overhead, as if they contained a starry world within themselves.

“What’s wrong?” Wu Du demanded. “Hey!”

Duan Ling’s eyes drifted closed. No more enlightened, Wu Du got up to keep cleaning the mess. Halfway through, it occurred to him: Perhaps this young man had wanted to die all this time, but didn’t have any good means of taking his own life. Judging by the look of him now, his father was likely dead. Maybe he’d taken the poison himself before jumping in the river. After Wu Du rescued him, he must’ve found the will to live again until he’d heard about Elder He’s powerful poison. For some reason, something about the conversation had plunged him back into despair.

“Hey,” Wu Du said again.

He sat on the threshold with his legs extended and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. Rolling up his sleeves, he looked at Duan Ling where he lay on the ground.

“I have another question for you. Were you lying to me when you said the bandits poisoned you? Did you take that poison yourself, then jump

in the river?”

Duan Ling couldn’t answer. He’d lost all grasp on reality. His mind was wiped blank, frozen in memories of his father, as if he’d put up a high wall blocking himself off from the horrors of the world.

“These are places from the old homeland, but I lived in Xichuan once. It had bustling streets that stretched ten miles across the city, and its green waters flowed like emerald ribbons. The starlit Mount Yuheng of the west is forever enveloped in mist, and the dissolute Jiang Prefectural City never sleeps. The sky will be our blanket, the ground our mat.”

“When spring comes, the city is awash in peach blossoms. And the sea—it’s boundless.”

“Whatever you desire, I can give it to you.”

“Everyone has a purpose they must fulfill in life. It’s predestined from the moment you’re born. Some are meant to farm, some to fight wars, and others are born to rule nations.”

“Dad owes you. No one will ever take your place, as long as I live.”

“Life is miserable and short. To live in this world, you must face many cruelties.”

“Look at you, all grown up.”

“Another word from you, and your dad won’t be able to go. I never wanted to leave to begin with.”

“My son.”

“Did your dad die—did you see him die?” Wu Du’s voice rammed through that protective wall, dragging Duan Ling back to the present. “I figure your dad must want you to live.”

Duan Ling’s eyes refocused slowly; above him there was a blur like the shadow of a great hound, as if Li Jianhong had come to speak to him with a gentle smile.

“Did you think I was truly gone?” Li Jianhong asked, gazing upon him tenderly. “My son, I will always be with you.”

Disorganized thoughts flooded Duan Ling’s head. He didn’t know if it was coincidence or fate that it had taken so long for him to hear of his

father’s death. The news had come too suddenly, and it had crushed him in an instant.

But it had also come at the perfect time. Neither at the bottom of the cliffs in the Xianbei Mountains, nor in the freezing cold and snow of Luoyan, nor in the rapids of the Min River, where he certainly would have succumbed to death. Instead it had come to him in front of this stranger, on a bright, beautiful night with the moon shining clear overhead.

He hadn’t died. He’d been saved by Wu Du.

Up to this moment, the thought of reuniting with Li Jianhong was all that had kept him going—until he made it to this man. It was as if Li Jianhong’s valiant soul, shrouded in darkness, had used its final spark to give his most beloved son the strength to live on.

Even if his son’s path was full of pitfalls, even if everyone turned their backs on him, Li Jianhong didn’t want him to know. The heavens had watched over the Li family’s Great Chen, guiding Duan Ling safely onto the path home and protecting him along the way. Whenever he dreamed of Li Jianhong, someone came to his aid, as if moved by the hand of fate—and this time, Li Jianhong’s silhouette faded away to reveal Wu Du, still seated on the threshold with a puzzled look on his face.

Duan Ling’s eyes slowly gained focus.

“Think carefully,” Wu Du said to him. “For people like us, who live in the mortal world, death will come no matter what. It’s better to live an unremarkable life than seek a heroic death.”

Without another word, he rose and went inside. He shut the door and put out the lamps, leaving Duan Ling to lie in the courtyard with only the bright moon for company. Only then did he begin to sniffle, and the floodgates finally burst. Duan Ling had never, in his entire life, felt the grief that crashed over him then. He crawled shakily back to his woodshed, where he wiped his face clean with a robe spread on the floor. At last, he buried his face in his knees and sobbed his heart out.

He remembered when his dad had taken him to school but couldn’t bear to leave, watching over him through the window. Duan Ling had shooed him away then, afraid of being laughed at by his peers.

The night before Li Jianhong left to march with his army, the moment before he'd gone away, his dad had said, *Tell me you don't hate me. Tell me you forgive me.*

Duan Ling had refused, making his dad seal his promise to return with a clap—but how could he ever hate his father? Duan Ling had looked for him since he was very, very small, always believing his father would come back for him, that they would rely on each other forevermore. Just as Li Jianhong had searched for him, traversing mountains and rivers until he found his son, Duan Ling had always been waiting for his father's arrival, no matter how late. But in the end he'd spent such a short time with Duan Ling, leaving far too early, before he could even say goodbye.

Life is miserable and short—he finally understood this saying.

The door of the woodshed abruptly swung open, and Wu Du held a lamp to his face. Duan Ling gazed up at him, tear tracks streaked across his cheeks. Somewhat at a loss, Wu Du wrenched his mouth open in irritation and poured more liquid down his throat. The second Duan Ling swallowed the medicine, drowsiness overtook him. He lay on his side, head swirling. Wu Du must've given him a sedative to stop him from dwelling on his painful thoughts.

Finally, he slept.

Duan Ling woke at dawn the next day.

Wu Du ate his own breakfast, yawning, then kept watch over him for a time. Just as on any other day, Duan Ling tended and watered the flowerbeds. He no longer seemed so desperate to end himself.

"I've said my piece," Wu Du told him. "If you try and take your life again, I won't stop you. But if you want to die, go do it somewhere else. Save me the trouble of dealing with your body. Understand?"

Duan Ling glanced over at him, and Wu Du, standing on the veranda, suddenly found him an eyesore. His feelings for this young man were complicated: He sympathized with and pitied him, but also felt a grudging respect. He must've suffered no shortage of hardships to come to this point.

“Tidy the room,” Wu Du ordered before changing into his day robes and stepping out the gates.

Duan Ling took off his shoes and entered Wu Du’s room to clean. Wu Du hadn’t left him any lunch, so he settled down on the veranda, staring up at the clear blue skies as cicadas cried outside the walls. Resting there, he was finally able to untangle many events that had puzzled him before—and just like that, the heavy past crumbled to dust.

“There are some things one must do—even if it means going through hell, even if you know death is certain.”

But what was it that he must do?

An early summer breeze swept through the courtyard, rustling the leaves and sending flecks of sunlight dancing across his body. What Duan Ling most wanted now was to find where Li Jianhong was buried, so he could visit and speak to him.

He let his mind drift again, remembering how Lang Junxia had poisoned him. Time and again, he’d faced death. Time and again, he’d escaped with his life intact. Could he really persist in seeking to end his own life? Perhaps he should leave Xichuan and roam the lands under a different name—become a person no one recognized. But what meaning was there in a life like that? He’d never be able to forget this part of his life; he would surely dwell on it until he died.

But what else could he do? Stay where he was?

How had Li Jianhong died—and where had he given his life?

After reflecting for an entire afternoon, Duan Ling arrived at a decision. He couldn’t leave Xichuan, and he couldn’t die just yet. There were still many things he had to do, although those things might be as hard as moving mountains. He no longer had his father by his side to protect and care for him. From here on out, he could only rely on himself. *One step at a time,* Duan Ling thought. If and when he could no longer hold on, then death would come as a release.

When Wu Du returned home, he tossed Duan Ling two pieces of cooked beef as if feeding a dog. Duan Ling caught the meat, took one look at it, and tore in. Wu Du peered around inside his rooms. Satisfied with

Duan Ling's work, he sat down at the table and flipped open his copy of *Fundamentals of Medicine* again.

"Can you read?" he asked.

Duan Ling nodded. Wu Du didn't bring up what had happened last night. He handed a paper slip to Duan Ling and said, "Then weigh the ingredients according to this script."

Chapter 46

THOUGH HE RECOGNIZED the formula was a poison, Duan Ling didn't ask who it was intended for. He measured out the ingredients according to the script, a task he could accomplish with his eyes closed after his time at the apothecary in Luoyan. However, the poison Wu Du had given him to craft was unique, with many counteracting ingredients that either sharply increased or decreased one's internal heat, inducing several latent effects.

"What's this for?" Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du stopped and glowered at him. Duan Ling took the hint from his expression, but Wu Du made himself clear anyway: "Ask me another question, and I'll test it on you first."

Duan Ling shut his mouth.

At this point Wu Du remembered the brat didn't even care about his own life, so the threat was meaningless. He sighed. Honestly, what was he supposed to do with this boy?

After gathering the various components, Duan Ling began grinding the mixture into a powder. He added honey and rolled the powder into a pill, then baked it solid on the stove. He suspected it was a difficult to detect, slow-acting poison that would kill the recipient if they didn't receive the antidote within a certain period.

"I bet you're thinking you're not afraid of dying, so you don't need to be afraid of me poisoning you," Wu Du said, slanting him a glance. "But let me tell you, I have ways of making you suffer that will have you begging for the sweet release of death."

Duan Ling moved his lips to tell him *no*, he wasn't thinking so, but the slight quirk at the edge of Duan Ling's mouth kicked Wu Du into a rage. He dropped his brush and stepped forward to yank on Duan Ling's lapels.

"What's so funny?" he demanded. "What's so funny?!"

Duan Ling panicked, his eyes widening with terror. His expression seemed suddenly familiar to Wu Du, as if he'd seen it somewhere before, though he couldn't remember where.

Fortunately, Wu Du was all bark and no bite; once he'd threatened Duan Ling into order, he released him and set him back to work. As long as Duan Ling didn't provoke or distract him, Wu Du never went out of his way to bother Duan Ling either.

Duan Ling spent the whole afternoon pondering what his next move should be. He reflected on the conversation between Wu Du and Elder He, remembering they'd mentioned a "crown prince." After his father died, the Chen Empire must have gained another crown prince. It was unlikely this new crown prince was a brother of his, and given that Lang Junxia had poisoned him as soon as he arrived in the city… Duan Ling's next thought chilled him to the core.

What if, after his father died, Lang Junxia had found someone to assume his identity? Did Mu Kuangda know about it? If he and Lang Junxia were working together, then Duan Ling had to conceal his presence here in the prime minister's residence from them both at all costs. But if Mu Kuangda *was* involved, why hadn't Lang Junxia handed Duan Ling over? Why poison him in secret and dump his body in the river?

With this in mind, Duan Ling made a daring assumption that—while it seemed absurd to him—was surprisingly close to the truth: Lang Junxia had produced a false crown prince and no one else knew; Mu Kuangda didn't even know of Duan Ling's existence. After his father died, Mu Kuangda must've thought all the power was in his hands, that he could control Duan Ling's fourth uncle as well as take over the court—but unexpectedly, a crown prince had appeared and thrown his plans into disarray.

In that case, who could the poison Duan Ling was making possibly be for?

His thoughts turned another corner. If everything was as he suspected, there was a solid chance he could survive this predicament. Even if Duan Ling remained in Xichuan, and even if Lang Junxia discovered he had survived, he wouldn't rashly enter the prime minister's residence to kill him. The safest path was to remain by Wu Du's side.

Before he decided any next steps, he needed to find out if his theory was correct.

When he was clearheaded, Duan Ling was a quick and decisive thinker. As he ground the herbs into powder, he flew through a multitude of additional considerations. He even weighed the odds that this new crown prince might be legitimate. Maybe his father had fallen in love after coming back to court and left behind another son… But no, that wasn't possible. Besides the fact that Li Jianhong wasn't that kind of man, any such prince would be an infant; he wouldn't warrant Mu Kuangda going to such lengths to poison him—not to mention that this dosage was clearly for an adult.

A young man appeared at the gates of the courtyard house and called, "Wu Du!"

The visitor's eyes flicked past Wu Du over to Duan Ling. Startled to find a stranger here, he snuck a few more curious glances. Their young caller had a charming, pretty face, and his clothes were fine. He was obviously someone of high status, but as he had no servants with him, Duan Ling guessed he was here to make a personal request.

Wu Du rose to greet him. "Mu-gongzi."

Mu Qing—Mu Kuangda's son—gave Duan Ling another once-over before turning haughtily to Wu Du. "I need you to put together a prescription for me."

"Without orders from the prime minister, I can't make anything," Wu Du told him. "If you want poison, Young Master, I need a letter or a verbal order."

Mu Qing held out a script, but Wu Du made no move to reach for it.

"You really won't make it for me?" Mu Qing asked, a furrow of dismay appearing between his brows.

Wu Du stood silently under the veranda. Mu Qing threw the script at him, and it fluttered through the air before landing on the floor. "Think carefully before you refuse. I'll give you three days."

Without waiting for Wu Du's response, Mu Qing turned and left.

The exchange threw Wu Du into a trembling rage. After a tense moment, he bent over and picked up the slip of paper, then slapped it down

on the table. Duan Ling—still baking his pills—wiped his hands and took a look. *Can't he just go buy it somewhere else?* was his first thought, but as he looked closer, he realized it was a strong aphrodisiac.

"So, do we make it?" Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du sat heavily on the divan and poured himself a cup of tea from the kettle. "Get lost," he hissed.

Duan Ling tucked the slip away and finished making the pills. Wu Du tossed him a wooden box, and Duan Ling arranged the poison neatly inside before leaving Wu Du alone.

That night, lightning streaked across the darkening sky. It had begun to rain, and the side-court household's roofs were all leaky.

Halfway through dinner, a messenger arrived to summon Wu Du for an audience with the prime minister. He had no choice but to set down his chopsticks and go. When he returned later, he was drenched to the bone; he stayed only long enough to snatch the wooden box before leaving again.

While he was gone, Duan Ling arranged several buckets throughout Wu Du's hall to catch the leaks. Rainwater pattered down merrily, both outside and in. As thunder rumbled overhead, Duan Ling curled up inside the woodshed. He was just getting comfortable when Wu Du shoved open the door.

"Hey—I called you so many times! Can't you hear me?!"

Wu Du was shirtless, his muscular back and shoulders dripping water. His thin white pants, plastered to his thighs, had gone see-through, revealing the skin underneath.

"Huh?" Duan Ling said, vacant.

"I said get inside!" Wu Du roared.

Duan Ling leapt to his feet and jogged after Wu Du into the main hall.

"Dry my clothes and books," Wu Du ordered.

Obedient as ever, Duan Ling hung up Wu Du's wet clothes and placed his boots by the fire before wiping up the water on the floor. The

bookshelf against the wall had also gotten wet, so Duan Ling pulled it away from the wall, carefully opened the books, and smoothed out their damp pages.

"Sleep there," Wu Du said, pointing to the corner.

Duan Ling understood he wouldn't be going back to the woodshed that night. He laid down fresh sheets for Wu Du before making a bed for himself. Then he nestled down in the corner, the sound of rain dripping into the buckets lulling him to sleep.

Halfway through the night, something hit him, startling him awake.

"Be quiet," Wu Du said. "You're so loud I can't sleep."

Duan Ling spent a sleepy moment wondering what his problem was before it occurred to him that he'd been talking in his sleep. A cold sweat prickled down his back at the thought, and he got up to empty the buckets.

For three days it rained, and for three days, Duan Ling remained in the hall, with Wu Du stuck inside with him. Mu Kuangda didn't summon him again, and it was raining too hard to venture out. Other than sending his two meals each day as usual, Mu Kuangda left him idle. Wu Du had no money of his own. When Zhao Kui died, what little Wu Du owned had been confiscated by the court, and Mu Kuangda had made no effort to return his possessions to him. These days, he lived off whatever paltry rewards Mu Kuangda granted him from time to time.

So poor! Duan Ling thought, watching Wu Du count out his silver taels—one, two, three… He was just short of twenty. Though Duan Ling had never labored for money, he had lived a rough life back in Runan, and he knew the importance of having it. Great heroes might meet their downfall for lack of a single coin, as the saying went. After spending what he needed for his stocks of medicinal herbs, Wu Du had barely anything left over.

While Wu Du was tallying his savings, another visitor arrived. He scooped the silver back into the bag and out of sight.

Changliu-jun had appeared at the gates, holding an umbrella over Mu Qing. "The roof needs fixing," he commented.

"Did you make what I asked for?" Mu Qing said.

“Without the prime minister’s orders, I can’t make you anything,” Wu Du insisted.

Mu Qing and Changliu-jun stepped into the courtyard. They didn’t enter the hall, and neither did Wu Du step out to meet them. Mu Qing turned to Changliu-jun.

“Just do it,” Changliu-jun said. “Why are you so worried about the rules? Make him the prescription, and I’ll have your roof fixed.”

Wu Du was at a total loss for words.

“I’ll give you two more days,” Mu Qing said. “Do it or don’t. Let’s go.”

Duan Ling peered at Wu Du from his spot in the corner. When Changliu-jun and Mu Qing left, he moved to gather the ingredients.

Yet as he pulled open the drawer, Wu Du shot to his feet, making him jump and dodge clumsily; he knocked over the table in the chaos. Wu Du scooped up a nearby vase, ready to bring it down on Duan Ling’s head. Duan Ling cried out in alarm and scrunched his eyes shut.

Wu Du stopped in his tracks, vase in hand.

When the porcelain didn’t smash on his head, Duan Ling cracked his eyes open and looked at Wu Du. Still in a stifling rage, Wu Du put the flowerpot in its proper place and dragged Duan Ling by the lapels over to the medicinal cabinet.

“Go ahead then, make it!” he yelled. “Make it for him! Let’s see what you’re capable of!”

Duan Ling stood frozen.

“Get on with it!” Wu Du shouted. “One mistake and I’ll kill you!”

Duan Ling jolted into action, pulling open drawers, fetching dry ingredients according to the slip, and showing them to Wu Du when he was done.

“That’s everything,” said Duan Ling. “You have them all.”

“Now, get the mortar and grind them up,” Wu Du ordered.

Duan Ling did as he was told, grinding the medicines into a powder.

“Come here,” Wu Du said, waving him over.

Sensing danger, Duan Ling shrank back. Wu Du closed the distance in one large stride. He grabbed Duan Ling’s jaw and squeezed his mouth open, then dumped the entire mortar full of powder onto his tongue.

Duan Ling shuddered, holding a mouthful of an aphrodisiac that was sure to kill him if he swallowed it. Fortunately, Wu Du took his threat no further. He released Duan Ling, who scrambled away to rinse his mouth.

By the time he returned, Wu Du had settled down for his usual afternoon nap. Duan Ling set about tidying up the room again, taking great care not to wake Wu Du. While closing each of the sure-to-become-moldy books, he flipped over one titled *Herbal Compendium*, which held records of many rare plants he’d never seen or heard of. So engrossed was he in the book that, before he knew it, the sun was setting and Wu Du had woken up.

Wu Du pulled open the medicine chest drawers, weighing out dry ingredients.

Aren’t you being unnecessarily difficult, doing everything again? Duan Ling thought when he realized Wu Du was preparing the same strong aphrodisiac he’d made earlier in the afternoon.

When he was done, he threw the packet at Duan Ling. “Deliver this. You know who to give it to.”

Duan Ling was terrified to leave the household, but if he stayed, he would certainly get hit. He could handle a beating, but it would be genuinely troublesome if Wu Du came to suspect him—and so, with the packet tucked into his robes, Duan Ling ran out into the rain in search of Mu Qing.

Chapter 47

SHOULD HE TAKE the chance to escape the manor and gather information outside? But running off the first time he was sent on an errand would undoubtedly put Wu Du on alert, and Wu Du becoming suspicious was the last thing he wanted. Duan Ling stood in the rain peering down the alleyway for another moment before deciding to stay.

The gate from the remote side courtyard into the prime minister's manor was locked, and Duan Ling wandered for a while before finding the back entrance. The gatekeepers stopped him there, questioning him and then questioning him again before finally allowing him entry.

A maidservant led Duan Ling along the corridor until they came upon Mu Qing, currently bearing the brunt of a middle-aged man's temper as he disciplined the young man. Duan Ling stopped in his tracks, not daring to venture closer. A cricket jar sat beside Mu Qing, and six young men stood off to the side, clearly scared out of their wits at the man lecturing their companion.

"Smash it," he ordered Mu Qing.

The man had an unmistakable aura of authority that drove a chill down Duan Ling's spine—who could it be but the prime minister himself, Mu Kuangda?

"Did you hear me?" the man said.

Mu Qing hesitated, then reluctantly smashed the exquisite Longquan celadon cricket jar to pieces with a crisp shattering sound.

"Now crush them."

Mu Qing was quiet.

The maidservant was reluctant to bring Duan Ling closer with the prime minister in such a rage. Hiding behind the pillar, Duan Ling remembered his own father. If he'd wanted to watch cricket duels, Li Jianhong would never have ordered him to kill them—he'd be more likely to catch one himself and join in on the fun.

Mu Qing's face flushed miserably, but after a moment, he crushed the cricket under his shoe.

Mu Kuangda pointed to the door behind them. "Go back and study."

Head ducked low, Mu Qing could do nothing but obey.

Mu Kuangda turned to the rest of the group. "None of you want to see what I'll do if I catch the young master playing with crickets again. Go."

Scared to pieces, the young men scurried off as fast as their legs would carry them. Mu Kuangda cast a glance toward the end of the corridor. "Who's loitering over there?"

Duan Ling wanted to duck out of sight, but it was too late.

"Laoye."[4] The maid stepped forward, her low curtsy confirming Duan Ling's guess—this was indeed the prime minister.

"Laoye," Duan Ling echoed, following her lead and greeting the man with a bow. He was wearing a set of Wu Du's old robes, comically large on his slim frame. The sleeves were rolled up, and the lapels, usually tied with a ribbon at the side, had been twisted into a knot and tucked into his waistband.

"Who's this?" Mu Kuangda asked.

Duan Ling didn't dare answer. In any case, if the maidservant introduced him, Mu Kuangda would be more inclined to believe her.

"Laoye," she explained, "this is a servant living in Wu Du's courtyard. He says he's come to deliver a prescription to the young master."

"Show me."

He fished the packet of aphrodisiac from his robes and handed it to the maidservant, who presented it to Mu Kuangda. Peering suspiciously at him, Mu Kuangda opened the packet and frowned at the powder inside, then walked into the study.

"His Excellency's asking what it is," the girl said with a nudge at Duan Ling.

Duan Ling looked into the study through the open door. Mu Kuangda stood in front of the table, looking outside with a stony expression. *Your son*

asked Wu Du to make him a strong aphrodisiac. Let's see if you'll beat him to death, Duan Ling thought. But abruptly, another thought occurred to him. If he did Mu Qing a favor now, who was to say it wouldn't be of use later?

"It was for the cricket," Duan Ling lied on the spot.

That was all Mu Kuangda needed to hear to stride into the courtyard garden and upend the packet into the pond.

"If you don't apply yourself in your studies, you'll drag the Mu clan's name through the mud," he sighed. He looked Duan Ling over again. "I didn't know Wu Du had taken a disciple. What bright eyes you have."

Duan Ling remained silent.

"If you want to curry favor with the young master, encourage him to take his studies more seriously. Don't encourage any more of his foolish antics."

"Yes, Your Excellency," Duan Ling intoned.

Still frustrated with his son, Mu Kuangda turned and walked off.

Duan Ling unconsciously touched his fingers to his lips. Mu Kuangda hadn't recognized him. Perhaps this first impression of him would stick firmly in the prime minister's mind; after all, Duan Ling didn't much resemble Li Jianhong. Only the shape of their lips was the same. According to his father, he took more after his deceased mother, and now it was this that would keep him safe in the prime minister's manor. As long as Mu Kuangda didn't examine him too closely, he surely wouldn't make the connection, especially with a supposed crown prince already in place.

"You. Come in here," Mu Qing called from the study.

"Do as the young master says," the maidservant urged him.

"Why are you speaking?! I wasn't talking to you," Mu Qing spat at her.

Chastened, the girl bowed and stepped aside. Duan Ling went in, where a sullen and angry Mu Qing waited, having first been scolded, then watched the aphrodisiac he'd taken such pains to acquire poured into the pond. Nonetheless, he pulled open a drawer and threw a clinking package in Duan Ling's direction. "Your master's reward. Tell him to fix his roof."

“Thank you, Young Master.”

Duan Ling picked up the money and was about to retreat when Mu Qing stopped him. “Wait. Do you know how to make this…medicine?”

Duan Ling nodded hesitantly.

“Make another packet for me while Wu Du’s not looking, and I’ll reward you personally. But if anyone finds out, you know the consequences.”

“Yes, Young Master,” Duan Ling said obediently.

Mu Qing cast him a sidelong glance and happened to meet his eyes.

“Don’t worry, Young Master,” Duan Ling assured him. “I’ll make sure to keep this from His Excellency and Wu Du.”

Seeing that this new brat knew his place, Mu Qing dismissed him with a wave. “Fine. You may go.”

Duan Ling calmly returned to the side-court household and handed the package to Wu Du. Inside were two silver taels. Wu Du collected them and put them away without a word. He then settled back down outside, watching the rain, while Duan Ling sat in the hall and thought about Mu Qing.

Young men had loose lips. If Duan Ling could find a way to hang around him, he’d have access to much important news. And if he was lucky enough to gain Mu Qing’s trust, he might eventually be able to meet his fourth uncle, the emperor.

On the other hand, attaching himself to Mu Qing would also put him in a much more precarious position. The likelihood of running into Lang Junxia and the false crown prince would increase considerably. It was possible the false crown prince—whoever he was—wouldn’t recognize him, but Lang Junxia most certainly would. Staying alive was his first priority. His father had told him once that the most dangerous place could often be the safest. Lang Junxia didn’t know he was alive, so it would never occur to him that Duan Ling might be hiding in the prime minister’s residence.

After several days of waiting, Duan Ling was delivered an opportunity.

“Go buy two flatbreads for dinner,” Wu Du told him. He counted his coins carefully and threw them to Duan Ling. Catching the money, Duan Ling thought, *How bleak the future*. He felt a good deal of sympathy for Wu Du’s money troubles. As a freeloading mouth in the household, it wasn’t his business to worry what was in Wu Du’s purse—but seeing Wu Du spend less and less as time went on made him feel sorry anyway.

As he walked out cradling the coins, he thought, *When the day comes that I’m finally wearing the imperial robe, I’ll stuff you with delicacies till you’re bursting*. Though considering his current plight…wasn’t that just wishful thinking?

He felt compelled to glance back at Wu Du.

Wu Du bristled at once. “What?!” he snapped defensively. “What are you thinking?”

Duan Ling pocketed the precious coins and answered, “I was thinking if we cooked for ourselves, we could eat whatever we want; we wouldn’t have to go out and buy meals.”

Mollified, Wu Du grumbled, “You’re so annoying. Just go get something.”

With a nod, Duan Ling wisely took his leave.

Being allowed out was a rare opportunity, but he didn’t dare wander off. If Lang Junxia was living in the palace, he wouldn’t have the leisure to stroll the city streets. As long as Duan Ling kept a low profile, no one would try and take him aside to interrogate him. He bought the flatbreads at the market as Wu Du had asked, then made his way to a teahouse to see if he could catch a few words of news.

But no one was discussing the emperor who’d passed more than six months ago, and Duan Ling was reluctant to ask for fear he would stay too long. He loitered for a while, but in the end, had to hurry back home.

As expected, Wu Du was less than happy about the delay. “How does it take so long to buy flatbread?” he demanded. “Were you waiting for the wheat to sprout?!”

“I don’t know the roads,” Duan Ling said. “I got lost. A kind passerby pointed out the way for me.”

He was better at lying now, able to craft seamless stories on the fly.

“Whatever, whatever,” Wu Du said, taking him at his word. “Let’s eat.”

Listening at a teahouse wasn’t the best strategy. With so many people telling so many different stories, it wasn’t a reliable source of news. Next time he should go somewhere else—but where? Eavesdropping outside the prime minister’s study was as good as asking for death. Still pondering, he recalled that when he’d studied at Biyong and Ming Academies, news always arrived there first. Was there a similar school in Xichuan?

Duan Ling had gone back and forth on the merits of summoning his courage and pretending to ask Wu Du an innocent question about the late emperor. But upon further consideration, it was too risky. He didn’t know Wu Du’s intentions. If he turned out to be another Lang Junxia, there would be no one to save him from his fate.

Yet having observed Wu Du for some time now, Duan Ling had come to the conclusion that despite being a skilled poisoner, Wu Du was also a good person. He knew martial arts but led a life of integrity; he didn’t rob or steal, and he didn’t use his skill with poisons as leverage to elevate his own status. Sometimes, in the mornings, Duan Ling watched Wu Du training in the courtyard, his palms cutting through the air, as graceful as a hawk.

Today, after finishing his routine, Wu Du tossed him a small purse.

“Buy two flatbreads and half a catty of wine,” he instructed.

Duan Ling caught the money pouch. Seizing this new opportunity, he sped into the streets. After trying his luck near several of Xichuan’s private schools with nothing to show for it, it occurred to Duan Ling that the school with the highest number of students would be the Imperial Academy. He promptly asked for directions.

Upon arriving in an alleyway outside the back garden, Duan Ling stacked two stones under a window in the fence. Climbing on top of them allowed him to peer through the latticework. As it happened, a few students had just finished class and were standing in the garden chatting.

“…but in some ways, a reduction in mandatory labor and taxes is a good thing,” one of the students was saying. “The south can’t take any more

conflict. We must rest and recover. It's a pity we have ministers but lack generals…"

Much like at Biyong Academy, these idle students loved nothing more than to put on a sage air and talk politics among themselves. Some thought Liao and Yuan should be left to war against each other while Southern Chen recuperated. With the Liao Empire as a buffer, the Mongols couldn't reach Southern Chen, and once the Liao Empire was on its final breath, Southern Chen could snap up the benefits, like the fisherman watching the fight between the snipe and the clam. When Zhao Kui had been in power, he had prioritized military affairs over civil ones and put Southern Chen's people in jeopardy. Now that Mu Kuangda had enacted new laws lowering taxes in Xichuan and Jiang Prefecture, he had earned the unwavering support of the common people.

The discussion turned then to the policies of the new emperor, Li Yanqiu. The Li family had always been hands-off, leaving the court to manage governance, but the crown prince who'd returned was keen on reviewing memorials. Even so, he still mostly deferred to Mu Kuangda.

Duan Ling, having lost track of time listening, was gone so long Wu Du got sick of waiting for him to come back and went looking. He found Duan Ling just like this, standing on those stacked stones and peering into the garden of the Imperial Academy. Sunset had snuck up on him, and its golden rays bathed Duan Ling's face, full of yearning.

Wu Du stared from the alleyway.

"What are you doing here?" he finally said aloud, frowning.

Duan Ling jolted in surprise, nearly falling off the stones. Inside the college, the students had dispersed. "I passed by and wanted to…take a look," he stuttered out.

He assumed Wu Du would scold him, but instead, he turned and left without a word. As Duan Ling followed along behind him to their side-court household, he mentally organized the information he'd gone to such great lengths to acquire.

Back at the room, Duan Ling took on the task of dusting Wu Du's shelves. As he wiped, he discovered a case and a sheathed sword bundled in cloth. Aside from these two items, the rest of the shelf held only books. He

recognized the sword as the one Wu Du often carried with him. Duan Ling desperately wanted to open the case and see what was inside, but he knew too well that curiosity killed the cat. He left it alone.

Chapter 48

ONCE NIGHT FELL, Wu Du strolled over to the shelf with the case and sword. Duan Ling, already lying down in his corner, cracked his eyes open to steal a peek when he heard the noise. Wu Du's back was to him. As Duan Ling watched, he took an object from the case and settled down with whatever it was outside the room.

Moments later, Duan Ling heard the wobbling notes of a flute as Wu Du began to tune the instrument. As he strained his ears to listen, the notes drifting on the wind merged into a familiar melody.

"Joyful Reunion"—Wu Du was playing "Joyful Reunion"!

Duan Ling had heard the song countless times in Shangjing: from outside Ming Academy's walls, to Xunchun's melody in Qionghua House, to his dad's uneven notes. To think Wu Du knew this melody as well. Hearing the song once more lulled Duan Ling into a sort of trance.

Though Wu Du's playing had begun unevenly, the notes flowed more smoothly as he played on, ultimately cascading into a full, sweeping song that could coax an entire mountain of peach blossoms into bloom; he filled the air with music of hope and anticipation, free of all bounds.

The first time Duan Ling had heard "Joyful Reunion," the melody had been profound, as if expressing something that couldn't be put into words. Xunchun's song had been one of resentment and sorrow, as if all hope was lost. When Li Jianhong had learned how to play it, his tune was strong and sonorous. But listening to Wu Du play "Joyful Reunion," Duan Ling felt new and burgeoning emotions. The melody was potent but never domineering, richly meaningful but never morose; it was as open and free as the rivers winding through Xichuan's maple groves.

Drawn from his bedding by the flute song, Duan Ling walked to the threshold in only his underrobe and shorts. Wu Du sat on the steps, strikingly handsome in profile, a tinge of apathy and resignation shading his eyes. The melody faded, and he put down the flute. With the moon shining

brightly overhead in the boundless night, Duan Ling found himself completely submerged in the music.

“What was that?” he asked.

Wu Du turned slightly, looking him up and down. “What, you’ve never heard a flute before?” he asked, his lips quirking.

Duan Ling had no response to that. He’d hoped Wu Du would at least explain what the melody meant, but Wu Du ignored his question. He walked back to the doorway and set the flute aside, then lay down on his back and gazed up at the moon.

“When I was your age, I was already a killer,” he said.

Duan Ling stepped over the threshold and took a seat on the veranda to listen, hugging his knees.

In that peaceful quietude, Wu Du took a sip of the wine beside him and carried on, “I was fifteen when Shiniang handed me a copy of *Fundamentals of Medicine*, a flute, and Flashblade, and told me to go down the mountain in search of Shijie.”[5]

Duan Ling thought of Xunchun, who’d also played this melody, but he didn’t interrupt Wu Du.

“Shiniang was a woman who stood by her beliefs,” Wu Du said. “She used to say there are things you must do even if you have no way forward, even if your life is hanging by a thread. Your integrity is more important than your life. Coincidentally, someone else once told me something very similar—that there are things you must do even if it means certain death…”

Wu Du’s eyes were glazed with drunkenness. He lapsed into silence for a moment. “Have you ever gone to school?”

Duan Ling nodded.

“What do you want to do in the future?” Wu Du continued. “No matter what, don’t end up an assassin like me.”

Duan Ling watched him briefly, then said, “When my dad was alive, he sent me to school so I could gain scholarly honors.”

“Scholarly honors,” Wu Du snorted. He laughed distractedly and shook his head, unsure whether he was laughing at Duan Ling or himself.

“How much have you read? Recite something for me.”

“In the beginning, the heaven was black and the earth was yellow,” Duan Ling recited.

“Something else,” Wu Du said. “Who doesn’t know that one?”

“To study and learn in perseverance, is it not a joyous thing?”[6]

“Next,” Wu Du said airily, closing his eyes. “I’ve heard that one so many times my ears are about to fall off.”

“The Way of Great Learning is found in the manifestation of one’s radiant virtue.”[7]

“Don’t get it. Next.”

“When come the spring flowers and the autumn moon? Oh, how much I know.”[8]

Wu Du sipped his wine. He wasn’t interrupting now, and Duan Ling, recalling the many poems the headmaster had taught at Ming Academy, recited a few for Wu Du: “Grieving white hairs in the great hall’s mirrors, black silk at dawn turning to snow by dusk”[9] and “Each step that you take takes me from my love.”[10] Wu Du listened, occasionally taking another sip of wine until he’d finished the half catty. He leaned back against the bed, closed his eyes, and seemed to doze off.

Worried he would catch a cold sleeping uncovered in the corridor, Duan Ling used all his strength to haul him inside and onto the bed. Wu Du opened his eyes and watched Duan Ling with a drunken intensity, as if there was something he wanted to say. Duan Ling’s heart began to pound.

“Your lips look just like Yao Zheng’s,” Wu Du said with a hint of mockery. “Just seeing them makes me want to slap you.”

“Wh-who is Yao Zheng?”

Wu Du ignored his question, and Duan Ling settled him down properly in bed before slinking back to his corner.

He fixed his eyes on Duan Ling’s back as he rolled out his bedspread. “Why do I feel like I’ve seen you before?”

“Have you?” Duan Ling asked innocently.

Wu Du massaged the spot between his brows as he thought back, but nothing sprang to mind.

“We must be connected by fate, you and me,” Duan Ling said as casually as possible, arranging his bedding with his back to Wu Du.

“Oh? What do you mean?” Wu Du said without inflection, finally closing his eyes.

“You saved me twice. I owe you so much, yet I have no way to repay you.”

“Don’t take me for a saint,” Wu Du told him. “I saved you on a whim and I could kill you on a whim, so don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Duan Ling knew Wu Du was merely putting up a tough front; of course Wu Du wouldn’t kill him for no good reason. And indeed, after delivering this little threat, Wu Du went straight to sleep.

The next day, Duan Ling decided to put his plan to get closer to Mu Qing into action. He hoped to earn his trust, or at the very least, make himself a familiar face. At the same time, he couldn’t afford to rouse Wu Du’s suspicions and risk driving him away—without Wu Du’s protection, if Lang Junxia found out he was alive, he could kill him at any time.

With this quandary in mind, Duan Ling cast occasional glances at Wu Du, who had just finished practicing his cultivation exercises and was drenched in sweat. His technique was similar to Li Jianhong’s: Both transferred energy from the outside in, using footwork and palm movements to circulate qi through their meridians. Duan Ling drew water from the well and washed his hair for him in the courtyard.

“Mu Qing wants me to do something for him,” Duan Ling said.

“What?”

Duan Ling filled the bucket with water and poured it over Wu Du’s head. “He wants me to make the aphrodisiac again.”

After Duan Ling relayed the whole story, Wu Du asked, “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Duan Ling went quiet, then asked, “What should I do?”

He’d guessed that if he explained things to Wu Du clearly, he wouldn’t get angry—and he was right.

“What should I do?” Wu Du mocked. “Look at you, so tactful.”

Duan Ling fell silent again. Once he finished washing Wu Du’s hair, he patted it dry with a towel.

But Wu Du had no choices and no money, so with resignation he told Duan Ling, “Just do as he says.”

Duan Ling finally relaxed. With this, half the battle was won. He mixed the powder for Mu Qing but didn’t deliver it immediately. Instead he laid the packet on the table before Wu Du, who casually flipped another page in his book.

Later in the afternoon, Wu Du said: “Go take it to him.”

Duan Ling left with the aphrodisiac and entered the prime minister’s manor much more easily than before. He found Mu Qing studying in the same building, frustration written all over his face. The second he saw Duan Ling, he waved him over.

“Come in,” he said quickly. “Did you make what I asked for?”

Duan Ling knelt and took out the packet to hand over to him. “Half a mace per dose; no more.”

Mu Qing carefully tucked the packet away as if it was a prized treasure before retrieving some silver. “What’s your name?”

“Wang Shan.”

Mu Qing nodded. Duan Ling had spent days trying to think of an excuse to strike up a conversation with Mu Qing and make a good impression…but as it turned out, he’d been overcomplicating things. Locked inside the manor studying for days on end, Mu Qing was about to lose his mind. His friends no longer came over for fear that Mu Kuangda would crush them to death like the cricket, and the only company he had left was the maidservants who waited on him.

“Do you have any sedatives?” Mu Qing whispered. “Like one that could make a man faint, forget everything, and wake up thinking it was all a dream? We could put the guards to sleep and sneak out to have some fun.”

Duan Ling considered for a moment before responding very properly: “I don’t, Shaoye.”

“Then what about just a normal sedative? Surely Wu Du must have some of those.”

“No,” Duan Ling repeated. “He doesn’t use sedatives.”

Mu Qing looked down at the paper in front of him with a pained expression. Duan Ling noticed there were only a few lines written on it.

“Where are you from, then?” Mu Qing asked. “Do you know any fun games? I’ll give you money, and you can go to the market to buy some toys for me.”

“Shaoye, His Excellency would have my hide,” Duan Ling said.

Mu Qing had no argument against that. “Do you know how to write essays, or how to reply to stitches[11] and excerpts?”

He gestured over the paper on the table, which presented him with a line from *The Analects* as a topic: *Zi Lu, Ceng Xi, Ran You, Gong Xi sat by the master*. Duan Ling saw more wrinkled pieces of paper all over the desk and had a thought. Mu Qing seemed to have given up; he got up and fell back on the bed, arms spread. Duan Ling examined the topic again. He picked up a brush, dipped it in ink, and began to write.

Mu Qing stood and walked around the room, then went out into the courtyard where he stretched his body from side to side. But he didn’t tell Duan Ling to leave.

“Do you know martial arts?” he asked.

“No,” Duan Ling answered as he wrote.

Mu Qing wasn’t looking at him as he bent his torso. “Wait, isn’t Wu Du alone all the time?” he asked. “When did you start living with him? What did he do to you?”

In Mu Qing’s eyes, Wu Du was a peculiar character. Even without his reputation as a turncoat, Wu Du simply didn’t understand how to get on his dad’s good side and was always shut out by Changliu-jun. Anybody else would have slunk away in humiliation by now, but the assassin had swallowed the insults again and again just to stay in the side-court household.

Preoccupied with the essay topic, Duan Ling gave Mu Qing a partial answer: “Shaoye, I’m from Xunbei.”

“Oh, Xunbei?” Although Mu Qing was a rich young master, he had no arrogance about him. He’d been raised in a family of scholars, after all, so the basic manners were all there. “Xunbei… That’s north of Xunyang. What do people there do for fun?”

“The mountains west of Shangzi have lots of wild game.”

“It would be nice to go hunting,” Mu Qing sighed. “Hey, why don’t I give you money to buy me a horse at the market? It doesn’t have to be big. A Diannan pony would do. You could keep it in your courtyard, and I’ll go over and play with it when I have time—what are you doing?”

“I’m doing your homework for you, Shaoye,” Duan Ling said as he finished the essay and placed the brush back down on its holder. He rose to his feet and bowed to Mu Qing.

Mu Qing was dumbfounded. “You’ve gone to school before?”

Duan Ling stood aside, head bowed in silence as Mu Qing read over the essay.

“Th-this is good!” he exclaimed. “This is actually great!”

“Shaoye, you must change the beginning and end and some words in the middle. Don’t copy it line for line.”

“Yes! Yes!” Mu Qing cried with joy. “Thank you!”

He returned to his seat, and Duan Ling ground the ink for him as he copied the essay, changing a few sections. When it was finished, Duan Ling got up, and Mu Qing took some coins from his purse for a reward—but after a moment of thought, he put them back again. “Come again in the morning, the day after tomorrow. You can go back for now.”

Duan Ling acknowledged the dismissal with a nod, and Mu Qing’s eyes crinkled as he grinned at the essay he’d copied. After stewing over the assignment for nearly half a month, he could finally hand it in.

Chapter 49

WITH THE MONEY Mu Qing had given him for theaphrodisiac, Duan Ling stopped by the marketand returned home with dinner, including wine and braised meat.

“What took you so long?” Wu Du asked.

“I lost track of time listening to a storyteller,” Duan Ling said as he laid the meal out on the table.

He handed the remaining money to Wu Du, who eyed him with a complicated expression. “You must be happy. Now that you got a reward, you can have meat to feast on and wine to savor.”

His voice was tense with anger, but Duan Ling didn’t think it was because he’d come back late. He hadn’t even stayed out that long. Writing the essay took only an hour. Unable to guess what was on Wu Du’s mind, Duan Ling had opened his mouth to explain when he was cut off by a deafening *crash*. Wu Du had kicked the entire table, set as it was with food and wine, hard enough to send it tumbling out of the room; Duan Ling jolted, fright in his eyes.

“Your Master Wu with all his martial prowess is still no better than a dog,” Wu Du sneered. “I have to stoop to making aphrodisiacs for the young master of the prime minister’s family just to put some food and wine on the table. How could I not be happy?! I’m beside myself with joy!”

Now Duan Ling understood, but even so, he wasn’t sure how to comfort him. Wu Du got to his feet and stalked off into the corridor with a long sigh. Duan Ling carefully tidied up the spilled food, gathered the broken plates, and righted the table, resetting the meal as if nothing had happened.

“Let’s eat,” he called, coaxing.

Wu Du sulked back to the table, and they ate the food despite the fact that it had landed on the floor. After they finished, Duan Ling washed the dishes without another word. Wu Du lay down to sleep, still wearing his clothes.

The following morning, when Wu Du set about training in the courtyard, Duan Ling figured it was about time he resumed his own. He took a spot behind Wu Du and began copying his footwork and the movement of his fists.

“I’m not taking disciples,” Wu Du said coolly, turning and stepping to thrust his palm out.

Duan Ling watched this mountain-splitting palm technique with rapt attention, copying every move in a martial stance. Suddenly, Wu Du stopped and delivered a swift kick to the crook of Duan Ling’s knee. Caught off guard, he lost his balance and staggered. Wu Du moved to trip him again; Duan Ling lunged for him, but hit thin air and staggered forward. Wu Du kept tripping him, over and over, and Duan Ling kept lunging. After repeating this cycle several times, Wu Du burst out laughing.

“You have the foundation of a spinning top,” Wu Du ribbed him.

Duan Ling found it funny too as he got back on his feet, covered in dust from the yard.

“Save it. You’re not built for martial arts,” Wu Du told him.

After he walked off, Duan Ling repeated the footwork and palm work Wu Du had practiced from memory and was made fun of again. Wu Du settled down on the threshold to laugh at Duan Ling’s clumsy efforts until, some time later, a maidservant arrived. The prime minister requested that he pay a visit with his servant in tow.

Something flickered in Wu Du’s eyes. Considering Duan Ling had told him he’d run into Mu Kuangda days earlier, the request wasn’t unreasonable.

“If the prime minister asks where I came from…” Duan Ling began, heart pounding.

Wu Du also knew it wasn’t fitting that he’d taken in a servant out of nowhere and housed him without permission in the prime minister’s manor. The situation could break either way: If he didn’t give a clear explanation for Duan Ling’s presence, Mu Kuangda might let Wu Du keep him as a favor. But if he decided to conscript Duan Ling into the army or sell him off, there was nothing Wu Du could do to stop him.

“Don’t answer any questions,” he ordered Duan Ling. “I’ll speak for you.”

Duan Ling nodded, and they followed the maidservant through the manor into the prime minister’s quarters. Another servant greeted them and guided them into the study, where Mu Kuangda sat at a low table. Behind him, Changliu-jun stood guard with his mask on, and beside Changliu-jun stood a fidgeting Mu Qing. Another elderly man stood with them, presumably Mu Qing’s tutor.

Wu Du’s eyes narrowed slightly. Mu Kuangda took a leisurely sip of his tea. Two essays—one composed by Duan Ling and one copied by Mu Qing—sat before him on the table.

“What is your name?” Mu Kuangda asked Duan Ling.

Duan Ling kept his mouth shut. Frowning, Wu Du turned to him. “The prime minister asked you a question! Are you deaf?”

Didn’t you tell me not to say anything?! Duan Ling thought. *Did you forget on our short walk here?*

“Wang Shan,” he said, not daring to look directly at the prime minister.

Mu Kuangda recognized him at a glance. “I’ve seen you before. You’re the servant who brought the medicine for the crickets. My eyes have been opened; in all my years, I’ve never heard of a prescription meant for a cricket. Wu Du, do you spend your time researching things like this?”

Wu Du gave no response. The study was silent and still for a moment.

“Wang Shan,” Mu Kuangda said, picking up his son’s paper. “Did you write this essay for the young master?”

“He was teaching me how to answer…” Mu Qing tried to explain.

“Be quiet!” Mu Kuangda snapped, frightening him into silence.

Wu Du eyed Duan Ling strangely.

“I wrote some of it for the young master,” Duan Ling admitted.

“The tutor will give you an essay topic. Sit there and write your response.”

Duan Ling snuck a glance at Mu Qing, whose eyes were filled with guilt. He gave Duan Ling an encouraging nod, and Duan Ling sat down at the table and ducked his head. The tutor wrote out the assigned topic in two lines, then handed the brush to Duan Ling, who put it to paper and continued the essay without speaking.

“Take a seat,” Mu Kuangda said, finally acknowledging Wu Du.

Wu Du sat without tearing his gaze from Duan Ling. A conflicted expression had appeared in his eyes.

“I’d like to know where you got this little servant from,” Mu Kuangda prompted him, sipping the tea again.

Wu Du watched Duan Ling in silence. Duan Ling’s hand shook as he wrote, and eventually, he couldn’t help but glance up at Wu Du with pleading eyes. Whether because he had been moved by the yearning in Duan Ling’s eyes that day in the golden light of sunset outside the Imperial Academy, or whether it was the desperation now conveyed in that split-second glance, Wu Du again felt sympathy for this young man.

He gave in, spinning a lie about his origins in a few clipped sentences: “I knew his dad, an herb merchant. His mother died when he was young, and he spent his childhood in Xunbei. When the Mongols came, his father moved his business farther north. The boy had nowhere else to go when his father died, so he came to me. I gave him a temporary space in my courtyard for the sake of his father. I was hoping to find him a job in the manor, but it looks like I needn’t have worried.”

Wu Du glanced over at Mu Kuangda when he finished, but he wasn’t looking back.

“Have you attended school?” he asked Duan Ling.

Duan Ling said nothing, so Wu Du spoke for him. “His father wanted him to earn scholarly honors, but he was set back some years by the war.”

Mu Qing craned his neck to get a peek at Duan Ling’s essay. His father cleared his throat, and he shrank back like a turtle into its shell. Mu Kuangda couldn’t be bothered to make any more conversation with Wu Du, and the hall fell silent again, filled only with the quiet whispers of brushstrokes as Duan Ling wrote.

It was Wu Du who broke the silence next. “It’s been several days since I received any meals. Seeing as there’s no place for an idle man in the prime minister’s manor, I was about to pay a visit and bid Your Excellency farewell.”

Mu Kuangda almost spat out his mouthful of tea. He guessed almost immediately what had happened. It was glaringly obvious Changliu-jun had intervened to humiliate Wu Du, though Mu Kuangda didn’t say as much aloud. But as prime minister, he had a reputation to uphold. If word got out that he’d invited a guest to his manor but wasn’t even providing them three square meals a day, he would become a laughingstock.

He turned to a servant. “Tell the cooks if they give Wu Du anything short of three meals a day, I’ll have them beaten to death.”

Upon realizing Mu Kuangda hadn’t been punishing him on purpose, Wu Du felt his stormy mood lighten considerably.

Some time later, as clouds passed over the sun, Duan Ling laid down his brush with a soft *click*. The tutor collected his essay and bent to place it in front of Mu Kuangda.

Mu Kuangda glanced through the essay pages. “From tomorrow onward, you are to come here every morning to study with the young master. You may return in the afternoon to serve your adoptive father.” He turned to Wu Du. “It takes a single stab to kill a man, but an entire lifetime to raise one. Taking care of this young man will bring you good karma.”

“You could consider becoming a half-baked tutor, too. Doesn’t sound like too bad a job,” Changliu-jun added.

A snicker burst from Mu Qing, loud in the quiet hall.

Duan Ling’s buzzing nerves gradually settled. He was still a thousand miles from his true goal, but this was a most advantageous turn of events—even if it put him in a slightly more dangerous position.

“You can take him back now,” Mu Kuangda said. “How is the prescription coming along?”

“I’m still working on it.”

Duan Ling clambered to his feet and followed Wu Du out.

Mu Kuangda continued sipping his tea as they left. “One should rather kill a man than humiliate him. Changliu-jun, have a little heart. What’s the point of constantly tormenting him?”

Changliu-jun bowed in silence.

“You may go,” Mu Kuangda told him, then turned to Mu Qing. “You have one month to write this essay *properly*. Try another trick like that, and I will bring a stool with me to morning court every day and have you sit and write your rubbish essays behind me and the Censor-in-Chief.”

Mu Qing hastily nodded, having successfully dodged punishment for the time being.

Duan Ling spent the tense walk back to their side courtyard wondering what sort of fit Wu Du would throw on arrival. He knew this would cause problems, but he hadn’t been given much of a choice. He couldn’t move forward without offending Wu Du. Still, he was ridden with guilt when he thought how he had come to this point; when he was young, he’d never been one to lie. The first lie he’d ever told was after Lang Junxia had brought him to Shangjing and given him a new life story.

My name is Duan Ling. My dad is Duan Sheng…

If he wanted to survive, he had to lie. Slowly, as he’d come to understand the purpose behind these lies, he’d begun to lie more, and to many different people, in order to protect himself. But none of those lies had ever made him feel as guilty as lying to Wu Du.

Wu Du walked the whole way back to the room with a dark expression, not saying a single word.

The instant they passed through the door, Duan Ling turned to face Wu Du, but Wu Du gave him no chance to speak—he dragged Duan Ling outside and threw him onto the ground. Duan Ling staggered back to his feet, and Wu Du grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against a pillar.

“I didn’t think you were this calculating,” he hissed, his glower hateful. “Are you so eager to rise through the ranks?”

He squeezed Duan Ling’s neck until tears formed in Duan Ling’s eyes. Duan Ling gazed back at him with an awful feeling of guilt. Wu Du

kept an iron grip on his throat, neither tightening nor loosening his hold. Slowly, his anger faded right before Duan Ling's eyes—until finally, he let go.

Duan Ling sank to his knees, coughing. Standing over him, Wu Du still looked sinister but no longer as if he was on the verge of exploding.

"I'm sorry," said Duan Ling.

He wasn't going to deny blame. He could've placed it all on Mu Qing, claiming Mu Qing had interrogated him when Duan Ling delivered the aphrodisiac and made him write the essay in exchange for a reward of silver. But in truth, Duan Ling had planned everything, from start to finish—including the excuses he would offer. He didn't want to lie to Wu Du. So he admitted, "You're right: I want to rise."

"Then go serve your new master," Wu Du hissed, storming back into the room and slamming the door behind him.

Duan Ling sat under the eaves, thinking. Wu Du seemed to have been caught off guard by his lack of excuses. He'd found no real reason to get angry at the honest explanation Duan Ling had offered.

Wu Du yanked the door open a moment later. "Why're you still here?!" he yelled.

Duan Ling didn't answer.

While Wu Du's fits of temper were always explosive, his anger left as quickly as it came, as straightforward as a thunderstorm. The next slam of the door was not as forceful as the first; it was more for appearance's sake.

"I'm tired of being poor," Duan Ling said aloud, hugging his knees on the veranda. "And I'm tired of wandering. I don't want people to scorn me or betray me. I want to decide my own fate."

Inside the hall, Wu Du was silent.

"I don't want anyone to decide how I live, or if I live or die. I'm scared. I want to have a decent life," Duan Ling said.

He turned back toward the doorway. There was a slight gap where the door had bounced back after being slammed.

“So yes, I want to move up in the ranks,” Duan Ling said. “I’m sorry, Wu Du.”

Duan Ling slunk over to the door and peered through the crack. Wu Du was sitting in complete silence in the darkened room. Duan Ling pushed the door open, and sunlight flooded in, washing over Wu Du. Without another word, Duan Ling left to fetch well water and tend the herbs in the flowerbeds.

Words Wu Du hadn’t heard for a long time—so long he had almost forgotten that gentle voice—echoed in his head: *“You will decide the fate of many people.*

“For every life you take, even if there are a million reasons for them to die, the moment your sword pierces their body, everything they were will fade away. But what about you? You have the great power of deciding their fates—but have you ever given a thought to your own?”

Chapter 50

THERE WAS NO NEED for Duan Ling to go out to buy flatbread that day. The servants brought much finer dishes than usual from the prime minister's kitchen to Wu Du's side-court household, accompanied by a small flask of wine. This time, Wu Du didn't overturn the table in a rage. Once Duan Ling finished setting the table, an awkward silence hung between them. He waited for Wu Du to start eating first.

"Look at you and your limitless potential," Wu Du said out of the blue.

Duan Ling braced for a tongue-lashing as he poured wine for Wu Du, but Wu Du simply drank it without a word.

That night, Duan Ling slept in his usual corner, showing no indication that he intended to leave. Neither did Wu Du chase him away.

In the morning, he joined Wu Du's martial arts practice in the courtyard, standing beside him and copying his movements.

"Why haven't you left yet?" Wu Du asked, furrowing his brows.

"Okay, then… I'm off."

Thus dismissed, he made his way over to the prime minister's manor to begin his official career as a study companion. He didn't know much about Mu Qing but assumed he would probably be another Batu. Guys like Batu, he understood how to deal with. They might be dressed differently, but they were all the same on the inside; nothing about these types of boys could surprise Duan Ling.

But in this case, he was incorrect. Mu Qing turned out to be completely different from Batu. While Batu was sparing with words and never spoke his true feelings aloud, Mu Qing spilled every thought in his head like beans pouring from a bamboo tube, frank and without reservation.

"Wang—er—what's your name again?"

"Shaoye, my name is Wang Shan," Duan Ling said.

The tutor pointedly cleared his throat, but Mu Qing ignored him. “Why ‘Wang Shan’?” he asked.

The tutor cast Duan Ling a glance.

We’re in the middle of a lesson. Why’re you talking so much? Duan Ling thought.

“Answer the young master,” directed the tutor.

“The character *Wang*, with three horizontal strokes and one vertical stroke, is the kun hexagram in the *I-Ching*, the hexagram with the most yin,” Duan Ling said, taking the opportunity to prove his scholarly worth. “The character *Shan*, with three vertical strokes, is the qian hexagram, with the most yang. The meaning of *Wang Shan* therefore encompasses the yin-yang energy of the universe.”

This grandiose explanation for such a common name rendered both Mu Qing and the tutor utterly speechless.

“Then…why not another character with three verticals, like *Chuan*, the word for river?” Mu Qing asked.

“No reason at all. If it pleases you, Shaoye, I can change my name to Wang Chuan.”

Mu Qing dismissed this with a wave, and they returned to their studies. However, while the tutor was in the middle of explaining the text, Mu Qing’s attention wandered yet again. “Was Wu Du angry yesterday when you got back home?” he asked.

Duan Ling hesitated. With his lecture once more interrupted, the tutor took this opportunity to drink his tea, as if he was used to it.

“No, Shaoye,” Duan Ling said.

“Did the servants send you enough food?” Mu Qing asked.

Duan Ling now knew what he was fishing for. “Yes, they sent me some of the most delicious dishes I’ve ever tasted.”

Mu Qing winked at him then, clearly proud of himself.

The tutor resumed his lecture, but after another little while, Mu Qing started speaking to Duan Ling as if the tutor wasn’t even in the room. “What kind of poisons does Wu Du keep around? Anything interesting?”

What a trial it must be to be a tutor in the prime minister's manor, Duan Ling thought as he gave Mu Qing a brief response.

Although Mu Qing had many boyhood companions, he'd never met someone like Duan Ling. The young servants he usually spent his time with fawned over him: They went along with all his antics, treated him with utmost respect, and showered him with flattery. Whenever he asked them a question, their limited experience and narrow worldview yielded uninteresting answers—they seemingly could only ever be his attendants.

But Duan Ling was like a bottomless lake: mature and self-possessed, well-read and world-wise, with hidden depths Mu Qing wished to explore. He piqued Mu Qing's curiosity like a shiny new toy, one he needed to examine inside and out before he could let it go.

As the day wore on, he became only more interested in Duan Ling. In the afternoon they played kickball together. Back when Duan Ling had attended school in Shangjing, the students had loved to wrestle or play kickball in their free time, and had these two sports down to an art. The best among his classmates had been Helian Bo, who always garnered cheers and applause; having received Helian Bo's coaching and trained in martial arts himself, Duan Ling gained Mu Qing's admiration with barely any effort.

"Like this, this way," Duan Ling encouraged him as he showed Mu Qing the best techniques.

Mu Qing never would have guessed this fellow was an expert in kickball too. The servants he'd played with before kicked the ball around aimlessly; they didn't have the same skills as Duan Ling. What was more, Duan Ling didn't keep the best tricks to himself. The boys played for a while, kicking the ball back and forth, and afterward, Mu Qing lay down for a nap in his bed. When he woke, Duan Ling was fanning him absently while reading a book.

"You're so hardworking," Mu Qing said sleepily.

"I'm poor. I have to work hard."

Mu Qing rolled over and went back to sleep. Not long after, he woke for real—sitting up, yawning, and looking over at Duan Ling. The tutor returned in the afternoon and their studies resumed once more.

By evening on that first day, when Duan Ling had finished tending to Mu Qing and was readying himself to leave, Mu Qing could hardly bear to let him go. Ever since Mu Kuangda's furious public discipline, Mu Qing's rapscallion friends had become too afraid to visit, and his servant boys were too scared to egg him on in his usual schemes lest Mu Kuangda hear of it and beat them all to death. Poor Mu Qing would have to wait by himself for Duan Ling to come back the next morning to have anyone to talk to. As Duan Ling moved toward the doors, he saw Mu Qing staring vacantly under the eaves and felt as if he was committing some terrible crime. But then, it was a crime to leave Wu Du alone in the house all day doing whatever he did too.

Finally, Duan Ling bowed to Mu Qing and announced, "Shaoye, have a good night."

Still lost in thought, Mu Qing waved his hand in a half-hearted dismissal.

Back at home, Wu Du had already put out several dishes, and Duan Ling had brought several more back with him to add to their regular fare.

"Why didn't you start without me?" Duan Ling asked after washing his hands.

"How could I overstep and help myself to Wang-shaoye's meal?" said Wu Du.

Exasperated, Duan Ling made a point of setting Wu Du's bowl and chopsticks out with utmost respect. Wu Du finally picked up his chopsticks —though his displeasure was still clear. He interrogated Duan Ling about what he and Mu Qing had learned, and Duan Ling answered each question in detail. After dinner, Duan Ling washed the dishes and did laundry as usual; the hour was late when he finally went to bed.

Two weeks passed this way. Though Mu Qing had merely thought of Duan Ling as a playmate at first, some of the seriousness with which Duan Ling took his studies eventually rubbed off on the young master. The saying "you are the company you keep" in this case proved true: Duan Ling was as upright as a ceremonial jade zhang blade. He was not harmless, as he had a faint sharpness about him; nor was he filled with obvious purpose, as he was reserved and hard to see through.

“I see there’s been some improvement,” Mu Kuangda commented after a few days.

“Shaoye has indeed improved,” the tutor agreed. “Wang Shan, too, shows much promise. His essays read like those of a soldier who has taken up the classics.”

Sipping his tea, Mu Kuangda flipped through the papers with a leisurely hand, marking the essays written by his son and his son’s study companion.

“More like a scholar dabbling in martial arts,” Mu Kuangda said. “But a scholar at heart, nonetheless.”

It was said that the lowest members of society often acted out of righteousness, whereas the learned absolved themselves of such burdens of conscience. Mu Kuangda disdained the so-called righteous peasants, who in his opinion acted rather on passion and introduced chaos to his careful plans. The learned might lack a conscience, but there was a reason all was considered inferior to the pursuit of knowledge. It was only a pity there were so few avid scholars in his family, and that his own son was disappointing, no matter how strict he was.

“Reward him with silver,” Mu Kuangda declared. “Since you’re going back home, I’ll grant the boys a few days’ break. I promised Qing-er I’d let the two of them go out and have a little fun—but tell Wu Du to follow them. He’s a trained assassin, after all. It’s a waste for him to sit around at home.”

While their tutor took their essays for Mu Kuangda to peruse, Mu Qing and Duan Ling waited back in the study to be summoned. Although Mu Qing was nervous, Duan Ling was the picture of calm, strolling past the bookshelves to find a few to borrow for while their tutor was visiting his hometown.

Mu Qing thought he recognized this leisurely grace and confidence. The name hovered just out of reach, but he couldn’t for the life of him place who it was Duan Ling reminded him of.

“Don’t worry,” Duan Ling said over his shoulder. “You did great. ‘When Zi Lu was told he made a mistake, he rejoiced.’[12] You should be happy the master will come back to scold you and point out your errors.”

Mu Qing, busy doodling a stick figure with two lines for a beard, burst into laughter. Duan Ling always lightened the mood in stressful times; with him, studying felt much less like a chore.

“Politics are my worst nightmare,” Mu Qing groaned. “If I were in charge, I would just take money from the rich and give it to the poor, and everyone could live a comfy life.”

“But what would happen once the money is spent?” Duan Ling asked. “Ultimately, the problem lies in land.”

“Then I’ll make them buy land with it instead.”

The question posed in their monthly examination was how to settle the refugees that had fled south. During last year’s battles, millions of Han and Khitan commoners had flooded into the Central Plains and Jiangnan, having lost their own homes to the ravages of the Mongols. Many froze to death or died of their injuries on the journey south, fleeing to Jiang Prefectural City and then even further, across the Yangtze River. Thus, the topic Mu Kuangda had chosen was “A benevolent policy necessitates boundaries,” from the works of Mengzi, to address the current issue of allocating farmland throughout Southern Chen. Mu Qing understood his father’s intent even without Duan Ling’s explanation—it was Duan Ling who had told him before to think about the subtext *behind* the essay questions.

“Even if everyone buys land,” Duan Ling countered, “there will still be hardworking farmers and lazy farmers, lucky farmers and unlucky farmers. The money and land will slowly reaccumulate in the hands of a few, and in the end, there will still be some people with nothing and some people with thousands of acres of good farmland.”

“Then I’ll divide it up again.”

“Then the cycle begins again, never-ending,” Duan Ling laughed. “But be honest—if someone really told you to give all your family’s possessions to the poor, would you do it?”

“Sure.”

Duan Ling was struck speechless. But from what Duan Ling had seen of his character, Mu Qing truly *would* give away his possessions. If everyone was like him, the world could achieve true peace. *How did*

someone like Mu Kuangda get a son like you? Duan Ling thought, finding it rather ironic.

When their tutor returned and delivered Mu Kuangda's verdict on their essays, Mu Qing crowed with joy. The tutor released them for their break. But when Duan Ling began packing up his things to return to his courtyard and keep Wu Du company, Mu Qing's glee faded. Duan Ling probably wouldn't come over during the break. Mu Qing didn't know what to do. He no longer hung around the rascals he had before, and he didn't want to either. Duan Ling was much better company. He listened, didn't speak too much, and knew every trick in the book. He was good at catching grasshoppers and birds, he knew how to write essays and how to draw a bow, and he even entertained Mu Qing with riddles from time to time. The classics were always on the tip of his tongue, but he could crack jokes about the sages too. The pair were close in age, but Duan Ling was far more mature.

"How're you planning to spend your break?" Mu Qing asked him.

"I have to go home or Wu Du will definitely hit me."

Mu Qing had intended to keep Duan Ling for dinner, but when he heard that, he had no choice but to wave him off homeward. Finding suitable friendships at his age was hard. The young men in the capital were either fawning bootlickers or dull and inarticulate clods.

Though it was true one oughtn't judge a person at first glance, people naturally sorted those they met into different social classes—and surely everyone wanted to make friends with a person who was serious, interesting, and possessed of good taste.

Chapter 51

JUST AS BEFORE, Duan Ling knelt and set the dinner table. They'd been sent plenty of dishes again, though Wu Du seemed bored by them.

"How'd you make out on the monthly exam?" he asked.

"Pretty good, by the looks of the rewards," Duan Ling said. "How was your day?"

"Maybe I should go be a doctor instead and pick herbs for a living."

Duan Ling very primly set a pair of chopsticks in front of Wu Du with both hands, and the two began eating.

"Curing and saving people is the best path," Duan Ling said in good humor.

Wu Du eyed him. It was strange—Duan Ling had readily admitted that he wanted to rise through the ranks, but Wu Du didn't seem to resent him for it anymore. Wasn't that just the way of people? As the saying went, "Fear not the man who is petty, but the man who is false." In Wu Du's eyes, Duan Ling was as annoying as he was interesting: a half-grown boy always thinking inscrutable thoughts and saying outlandish things.

"When's your birthday?" Wu Du asked out of the blue.

"I forget." Duan Ling had mused that if Lang Junxia still had his birth certificate, the new crown prince's birthday would likely be on the same day, so it was better to keep it secret. "I think it's…the seventh day of the seventh month."

"That's coming up," Wu Du said. "Are you on break tomorrow?"

"Yes," Duan Ling said. He left mostly untouched the food Wu Du liked best, gravitating toward the dishes Wu Du ignored. It was the same for Wu Du—since Duan Ling was the one earning their living, Wu Du left him all the foods he preferred. They danced around each other like this, neither quite knowing which dishes to eat first.

"Why don't I take a few days off and take you out," Wu Du said.

Joy sparked in Duan Ling's eyes. "Where?"

At his age, Duan Ling still wanted to have fun. He'd been hoping to go out and explore, but was afraid if he asked Wu Du, he wouldn't come along. And he couldn't go alone, fearing he would run into Lang Junxia. Even if Lang Junxia had neither the time nor mind to leave the imperial palace for a leisurely stroll, Duan Ling still wanted to feel safe.

"Eat your food," Wu Du ordered him. "And don't ask so many questions. I'll decide after I find the catalyst I'm looking for."

Wu Du was still working on Mu Kuangda's prescription. It wasn't a matter of dragging his feet—rather, he'd spent so much time on it because the script Mu Kuangda had given him was problematic. If it was supposed to be a slow-acting poison, the formula was much too strong.

Wu Du, as a rule, used his poisons tastefully. Firstly, he never involved himself in unsavory business, nor used crude substances like tranquilizers, aphrodisiacs, and arsenic. Secondly, no one could be allowed to discover his formulas, or his reputation would plummet. Thirdly, he avoided poisons that led to a crude, instant death, preferring those that slowly, gracefully sapped his target's vitality.

Even Duan Ling thought the prescription Mu Kuangda had gotten ahold of was too obvious, easy for the target to detect; to Wu Du's eyes, it must seem unbearably crass, the equivalent of bludgeoning someone over the head with a sledgehammer. How could a poisons expert like himself accept such a task?

"Well, have you found it?" Duan Ling asked.

"No," said Wu Du. "I need to check some books. There are a few more options in *Herbal Compendium*[13] that I can't recall right now."

"I have the key to the manor's library," Duan Ling said. "If you need a book, we can go together."

Wu Du considered his offer.

"Or…I can go check it out for you?" Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du paused, then gave him a small nod.

After dinner, Duan Ling entered the prime minister's manor from the back alleyway, telling the guards he was there to chat with the young

master. By now he was a common sight and had no problem entering. He walked the familiar path through the garden to the library, then placed his lamp on the windowsill and set off in search of Wu Du's book. It was the tail end of summer, and a brisk breeze blew in, quietly snuffing the lamp.

Duan Ling had just turned back to light it again when footsteps sounded from below—someone was walking up the library stairs.

"Even if you tell him to look, Changliu-jun will never find it," came Mu Kuangda's measured voice. "He can't read. But keep that to yourself; don't laugh at him. I'll find it myself."

Duan Ling froze. Mu Kuangda was paying a visit to the library late at night, and he had someone with him who wasn't Changliu-jun. A lamp threw the shadows of two people on the wall as they came closer. Standing in the dark, Duan Ling saw Mu Kuangda enter the room with a scholar. Changliu-jun was usually just a step away from Mu Kuangda, guarding him, but right now he was nowhere to be seen. Without him here, Duan Ling likely wouldn't be discovered behind the bookshelf.

Should he hide and eavesdrop, or…

Making a snap decision, he stepped out from behind the shelf. "Greetings, Laoye," he said to Mu Kuangda.

Mu Kuangda and the scholar both started, having thought the library was empty. *Close call*, they each thought. Being men of intelligence, they both understood Duan Ling had done this to avoid suspicion and assure them of his loyalty.

Mu Kuangda relaxed. *This young man really is something*, he thought. Aloud, he said, "This is Qing-er's study companion." The scholar at his side nodded, and Duan Ling saw the light of approval in Mu Kuangda's eyes.

"I came here for some research," Duan Ling said. "But I got in Your Excellency's way…"

Mu Kuangda dismissed the apology with a wave. Aware that Mu Kuangda and the scholar had intended to have a private discussion, Duan Ling announced his intent to leave.

"Come here," Mu Kuangda said unexpectedly.

“The prime minister has a heart big enough to sail a boat in,” the scholar said, laughing when he saw Duan Ling’s hesitation. “It’s all right.”

Mu Kuangda and Duan Ling both chuckled.

“This is Mister Chang Pin, one of my advisors,” Mu Kuangda said.

Duan Ling bowed to the scholar, then set the lamp on the table and relit the wick.

Mu Kuangda passed him a key. “Unlock the furthest cabinet. Find the memorial to the throne from the twenty-seventh day of the sixth month last year.”

Duan Ling went to the cabinet as directed. It was packed full of memorials.

“The relocation of the capital will command many of Xichuan’s resources,” the scholar said.

“Moving the capital became inevitable once Zhao Kui passed,” Mu Kuangda said. “If this matter isn’t settled in the next few years, we’ll lose our power to push the move.”

Duan Ling found the requested memorial and blew off a layer of dust. Mu Kuangda seemed to like him and had made no move to send him away, so once Duan Ling placed the memorial on the table, he filled a teakettle, fed the fire in the lamp, and set the kettle down on top of it to boil the water.

“There’s a long and complicated history between the gentry of Jiang Prefecture,” Chang Pin said. “Putting new laws into effect will be hard when the Su, Wu, and Lin clans hold all of Jiangnan—and that’s without even touching the enormous expense of Xie You’s Black-Plated Army. They say armies are maintained for years to be used in days, but the costs of the Black-Plated Army are truly exorbitant.”

While Duan Ling was distracted listening to their conversation, Mu Kuangda unfolded the memorial, and Duan Ling cast a glance over.

“This memorial was reviewed by the late emperor,” Mu Kuangda informed him.

The word *Read* was written on it, along with three smaller words: *Do as written*. Duan Ling was intimately familiar with that brushwork. It was

Li Jianhong's hand.

A jumble of thoughts crowded his head, and for a moment, he sat stunned. He had a powerful urge to reach out and touch the memorial, but he knew he couldn't in front of Mu Kuangda.

"The late emperor ruled for only ten days. On the day of his ascension, he reviewed three memorials before leaving in haste." Mu Kuangda sighed, sipping the tea Duan Ling offered him. "The first concerned moving the capital, the second concerned the reclamation of farmland, and the third concerned lowering taxes."

"Three winning cards," Duan Ling commented.

Mu Kuangda and Chang Pin both chuckled.

"The memorials have been stored here for some time," Mu Kuangda said. "But now, a good opportunity has come to discuss moving the capital." He turned to Duan Ling and ordered, "Make a copy for me."

Nodding, Duan Ling found a spot to settle down. As he glanced through the memorial, he marveled at how clear and persuasive Mu Kuangda's writing was, following the structure of a four-act composition without a single wasted word. There was no embellishment; he wrote things as they were, starting from the small details and moving to the broader picture, every phrase decisive and to the point. Often a single sentence would carry several different meanings. The caliber of this prose made Duan Ling feel woefully insufficient. He had fancied his own essays more than decent in quality, but compared to the memorials composed by Mu Kuangda, he might as well have been illiterate.

"What are you smiling at?" Mu Kuangda asked, catching sight of his expression.

"I can't help it when I read good writing," said Duan Ling.

"You haven't read the prime minister's memorials impeaching officials yet," Chang Pin said with another chuckle. "Those are the ones that'll have you clutching your stomach in laughter."

Shaking his head, Mu Kuangda laughed too.

While Duan Ling copied, Mu Kuangda and Chang Pin began discussing the matter of moving the capital. Although Jiang Prefectural City

was a thousand miles away, Mu Kuangda knew it like the back of his hand. With a sheet of paper spread out before them, Mu Kuangda and Chang Pin analyzed the move in depth: how to distribute taxes and how to absorb Jiang Prefecture's gentry into the imperial court with the following year's imperial examinations.

Duan Ling split his attention between copying the memorial and listening to the conversation. Truly, one sentence from Mu Kuangda was worth more than ten years of reading; the man seemed made to be prime minister. How to divide power between the tradesmen, the farmers, and the court; how to manage Xie You and the army he headed; the autonomy of the Jiangzuo region… He delineated them one by one, all in perfect order. Not only was it necessary to avoid clashing with the interests of the powerful families in Jiang Prefectural City, they must also ensure that the court of the new emperor and crown prince had a proper place in this new capital.

"We'll need to hold a grace examination to promote the members of the three great clans in the city to court officials," Chang Pin said.

"Indeed," Mu Kuangda agreed. "But the Censorate and the Ministry of Revenue must be staffed by our men."

Duan Ling finished copying the memorial, by now so impressed with Mu Kuangda's foresight and depth of planning he felt he should kneel at his feet. Chang Pin fetched an abacus. His deft fingers clacked over the beads as he calculated Jiang Prefectural City's taxes, each lower bead representing a thousand taels.

"Note this down," Mu Kuangda instructed Duan Ling.

Duan Ling laid the copied memorial aside to dry, then recorded the farmland, taxes, and military cuts Chang Pin and Mu Kuangda calculated on a piece of rice paper. After several rounds of discussion, Duan Ling was still a little confused by the numbers—yet everything was crystal clear in Mu Kuangda's head. As he continued speaking, the topic veered to how to smooth things over with the three great clans of the city.

"We should arrange a marriage," Chang Pin said.

Mu Kuangda hummed in agreement. "The crown prince is of age, but the three great clans…" He shook his head—none of them were suitable.

“His Majesty likely intends to wed the crown prince to Xie You’s daughter,” said Chang Pin.

“We’ll revisit this,” Mu Kuangda said. After an entire evening of discussion, he had grown tired. He stretched. “It’s not easy being prime minister. Not only do you have to tally a mess of numbers, once in a while you have to stick your nose into other people’s marriages.”

Chang Pin and Duan Ling both chuckled at this. Mu Kuangda reviewed Duan Ling’s notes and nodded in satisfaction.

“Not bad,” he said.

“In that case, I’ll set out for Jiang Prefectural City tomorrow and prepare for your arrival,” Chang Pin told Mu Kuangda.

“Don’t skimp on necessary expenses—or bribes,” Mu Kuangda instructed.

Chang Pin murmured his understanding.

“I’ll write a new memorial and bring both copies to court tomorrow morning,” said Mu Kuangda.

Duan Ling held up the lamp to light the way out of the library for Chang Pin and Mu Kuangda without needing to be asked. Changliu-jun waited outside, and his eyes sharpened when he saw Duan Ling’s shadowy figure in the lead. Mu Kuangda waved him off, indicating there was no issue, and the small group meandered out of the library pavilion to find Wu Du waiting in the courtyard as well.

“I had a fateful encounter with your little friend today,” Mu Kuangda explained to Wu Du, guessing at once that he must’ve come in search of Duan Ling. “I couldn’t help taking up some of his time.”

Wu Du nodded. “Of course; we are at your disposal.”

“Since you put it that way,” Mu Kuangda said. “I must trouble you for another hour. If you’re in no hurry to sleep, walk with me.”

Wu Du hadn’t received a late-night request like this since he’d moved into the prime minister’s manor; he assumed Mu Kuangda must want to ask him about the prescription and quickly followed the group. With Duan Ling lighting the path through the corridor to the study, Mu Kuangda and Chang

Pin made light conversation while Wu Du and Changliu-jun trailed a few steps behind.

Halfway to their destination, Chang Pin cupped his hands and bowed. “I’ll take my leave here.”

Mu Kuangda nodded and returned the gesture. “Safe travels.”

“They will be thanks to you, Prime Minister,” Chang Pin said with another warm laugh, departing.

Mu Kuangda sank into deep thought; Duan Ling was left to illuminate the path in silence. He had begun to realize there were similarities between the prime minister and his son after all: Mu Kuangda and Mu Qing were alike in their warmth and courteousness toward talented men, as well as their friendliness toward strangers. No wonder Chang Pin and other scholars would rather stay in the prime minister’s manor as guests and advisors than take up official posts in the imperial court.

Duan Ling lit the way into the study with his lantern with Mu Kuangda a step behind. Changliu-jun waited tactfully outside. As Wu Du made to cross the threshold, Changliu-jun held out an arm, indicating he should stay outside as well.

Chapter 52

MU KUANGDA HAD MANY GUESTS and servants; normally, whenever he needed to write a memorial to the throne, there was someone on hand to prepare his brush and ink. But since it was late at night and he didn't want to wake the attendant—and since Duan Ling had already been listening to the conversation—Mu Kuangda allowed him to assist instead.

He understood at once that Mu Kuangda meant this as a reward. These actions showed his approval of Duan Ling and an appreciation for how he had comported himself in the library. Mu Kuangda was a tactful man, and he preferred others who were the same: those who knew what to say and what to do, and when not to ask or speak.

Duan Ling prepared the brush and ink and laid out his notes. Mu Kuangda leaned back in his chair and pointed to the copper basin beside him, and Duan Ling brought over a warm towel from it to place on his forehead. Mu Kuangda sat thinking for a moment, obviously collecting his thoughts, before picking up his brush and starting to draft the memorial. Duan Ling hesitated, wondering if he should see himself out—but since Mu Kuangda hadn't said anything, he once again assumed it was fine for him to stay.

Mu Kuangda's calligraphy was bold and powerful, and he used the Yan style.[14] He wrote his memorial in one sitting, starting with the problem of that year's autumn harvest, then delving into every matter proceeding on from there. He wrote without flourish, without excessive emotion, and without threat. After Xichuan had been thoroughly discussed, he moved on to Jiang Prefectural City, the estimated cost of moving the capital, and why the capital had to be moved over the autumn and winter seasons. In this manner, Duan Ling witnessed the conception and birth of a major decision directing the fate of the Chen Empire that very night.

Before he knew it, midnight had come and gone. Mu Kuangda set down his brush, and Duan Ling laid the memorial aside with the understanding that it held information that would affect the fates of tens of millions of their people over the following decades.

“Go back and sleep now,” Mu Kuangda said. “Keep an eye on the young master and make sure he works hard. Don’t let his youthful disposition get the better of him.”

Duan Ling agreed that he would and took his leave. Morning court was in just a few hours; Mu Kuangda needed to get what sleep he could.

Wu Du and Changliu-jun stood guard outside the door, not speaking. When Duan Ling stepped out of the room, Wu Du led him away. Duan Ling spent the whole walk home running through Mu Kuangda’s words in his head; the more he recited them, the more he felt this man was remarkable. He clearly had a long way to go in his own studies.

“Were you caught eavesdropping?” Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling explained what had happened, and Wu Du nodded along. “They were discussing the capital’s relocation—”

Wu Du gestured for him to stop. “It’s a fortunate and fateful thing that the prime minister likes you,” Wu Du said. “Don’t tell outsiders what he says or does.”

“You’re not an outsider,” Duan Ling replied without thinking.

Wu Du fell silent. Duan Ling thought he saw the corners of his mouth twitch, as if he was about to smile, and gazed at him curiously—but Wu Du’s usual stern expression instantly returned.

When they arrived back home, Duan Ling was so tired he curled up in his corner and fell asleep immediately. Wu Du threw a blanket over him and began reading the *Herbal Compendium* Duan Ling had borrowed for him.

The next day, which Duan Ling had off, he slept straight through the morning. At noon Wu Du kicked him awake for lunch, but Duan Ling merely rolled over and continued sleeping. Wu Du ignored him until dusk, when Duan Ling blearily crawled out of bed and ate his meal. As he sat by the well in the courtyard, washing Wu Du’s underrobes, he noticed Wu Du had changed his clothes.

“Going somewhere?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du grunted noncommittally as he assessed himself in the mirror. Ever since Duan Ling had first woken in his courtyard, Wu Du had worn a

robe of coarse cloth with no embellishment in a way that reminded Duan Ling of his father. If someone was good-looking, energetic, and had a naturally pleasing air about them, they would look good in anything. On the contrary, someone with a vulgar and off-putting aura would look vulgar and off-putting in anything they wore. But today, unexpectedly, Wu Du was wearing a deep blue embroidered robe that he'd dug up from who knew where. It had a musty smell, as if it hadn't been worn in a long time.

"It looks good," Duan Ling said as he peered at Wu Du's reflection.

Wu Du didn't respond. Moments later, he took off the blue robe.

"What's wrong?"

"Never mind," Wu Du said. "There's no point."

Duan Ling was utterly baffled.

"The prime minister gifted you a new set of robes," Wu Du said. "Go try them on."

"Oh," Duan Ling said, and went to scoop up the bundle that had arrived while he slept: a new, pale blue robe.

"Put it on and get yourself presentable. I'll take you out later tonight."

After changing into his new robes, Duan Ling considered himself in the mirror, recalling the fine clothes he'd worn when he accompanied his father to Qionghua House. He'd never worn the outfit again, fearing Yelü Dashi would discover his identity—but being a young man, in his heart, he loved looking fashionable.

He examined himself over and over again in the mirror, instinctively looking for the jade pendant that should've been hanging from his waist before he remembered that the golden age was no more, and the beautiful land had changed hands. He instantly felt downcast.

"Forget it." Duan Ling stripped off his new robe too.

"What are *you* sad about?" Wu Du asked, bemused. "Put it on, put it on. Don't embarrass me when we go out later."

"Where are we going?"

"To have a meal," Wu Du replied. "And see an old friend."

Duan Ling couldn’t recall ever hearing about Wu Du having any friends in Xichuan, but seeing the man’s contemptuous expression, he wisely stopped asking questions. Duan Ling hung the laundry to dry, then dressed himself in the gifted robes again, his anticipation returning. Since they would be walking around Xichuan at night, he wouldn’t be easily seen; he could finally go out without worrying.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Sometimes Duan Ling thought he was being too nervous, hiding like a frightened bird. Lang Junxia and the crown prince were ensconced inside the palace walls, believing him dead. So long as he stepped carefully, he should be safe.

Night fell over the city of Xichuan. The lights glowed brightly, and the wine flowed. The long, bustling streets were like a dream—Duan Ling hadn’t seen such a sight in a long, long time.

“What do you want to eat?” Wu Du asked.

“Anything’s fine,” Duan Ling said. “Where’s your friend?”

“Don’t worry about them for now,” Wu Du replied. “We’ll look for them later, after dinner.”

Duan Ling liked wontons, so Wu Du guided them toward a wonton stall while protecting him from being squished or lost in the crowd. They drew occasional glances from passersby—Wu Du was tall and trim, accompanied by a handsome, refined-looking young man. Duan Ling’s vibrant dress made Wu Du look like a servant in comparison. As they sat down at the wonton stall, Wu Du appeared somewhat distracted.

“What are you thinking about?” Duan Ling asked, in a buoyant mood.

Wu Du started, then replied, “Nothing.”

Seeing that he didn’t want to elaborate, Duan Ling didn’t press. But after another minute’s reflection, Wu Du explained: “When I meet up with my friend later, you don’t have to come with me. It’ll be tedious, so you should go have fun on your own. I’ll explain everything afterward.”

Duan Ling nodded, though he was giving Wu Du a suspicious look. Suddenly he laughed.

“What thought has jumped into your head now?” Wu Du narrowed his eyes.

He had guessed Wu Du didn’t want to stay in the prime minister’s residence anymore; he probably wanted to meet with a friend who was doing well and find different work. It was a good thing that he’d pulled himself together to do something about his situation, so Duan Ling was happy for him.

“There’s no harm in telling you,” Wu Du conceded. “This person has tried to meet with me several times, but I didn’t want to talk to him. But I’ve given it some more thought, and I want to find something else to do with myself,” Wu Du said.

Duan Ling hummed in agreement, but now, he felt hesitant. His and Wu Du’s fates seemed tangled together, strangely intertwined. When Mu Kuangda had recognized Duan Ling’s worth, Wu Du’s status had risen as well. That night at the study, Mu Kuangda had meant for Wu Du to stand guard—that was why he’d been asked along. Not just anyone could guard the door for the prime minister; the other man outside the door was Changliu-jun, and that alone was a declaration of the prime minister’s changing stance.

But Wu Du was a straightforward person. Unlike Duan Ling, he probably hadn’t picked up on a scholar like Mu Kuangda’s implicit undertones.

Duan Ling had given the matter quite a bit of thought. If he regained his status and what belonged to him, he would appoint Wu Du his personal bodyguard—a high position with a good salary. But if Wu Du left the prime minister’s residence, Duan Ling’s plans would also have to change. Would Wu Du really leave Mu Kuangda though? He’d already had three masters; he might not be any better off with a new one.

He studied Wu Du’s expression, sensing he was also hesitant. Eventually Wu Du seemed to make up his mind. “Let’s go.”

As they walked through the streets, Duan Ling’s eyes were drawn to the buskers; Wu Du soon realized that Duan Ling had fallen behind. He doubled back and impatiently dragged Duan Ling along.

“My lord—”

“Hey, my lord—”

They had arrived at a magnificent building. As soon as they entered, a heavily made-up girl came to greet them, coming so close she startled Duan Ling. “What are you doing?!” he cried.

He backed up a few steps and looked up. The plaque above the door read QUNFANG PAVILION in the script of an emperor from a century ago. Duan Ling was bewildered.

“In,” Wu Du said.

The girls examined Wu Du and Duan Ling with curiosity. Duan Ling had the appearance of a young master, while Wu Du was dressed like a servant, yet Duan Ling was obviously under Wu Du’s command. They painted a rather unusual picture.

“I… I’d better not,” Duan Ling stuttered. “I’ll wait for you outside.”

Wu Du grabbed his collar and marched him through the doors and up the stairs.

“Wait,” Duan Ling exclaimed, “I’ll walk on my own! Don’t mess up my new robes!”

Wu Du released him. He asked a girl, “Has the guest in the Tianzi Room arrived?”

“Not yet.” The girl dipped in a slight bow. “Please come in, my lords.”

“Take good care of this little lord,” Wu Du said. “Put him in the opposite room.”

Duan Ling tried to follow Wu Du, only for Wu Du to turn and look him up and down. “Why are you sticking to me? Go on. Or do I need to teach you how to enjoy yourself in a brothel?”

“No, no!” Duan Ling flapped his hands in a panic, and the girls laughed. Duan Ling blushed a furious red, and Wu Du leveled him with a cool stare.

“What did I tell you before?” he asked.

“Then I’ll…go eat something,” Duan Ling said. “When you’re done, let me know.”

“Order whatever you want,” Wu Du replied. “We’re not paying for it.”

Duan Ling entered the room opposite the Tianzi Room. The service was good here: A group of girls came in at once. Duan Ling had no idea that the expected thing was for him to choose a girl from the group. Assuming they’d all come to serve him, he simply said, “You can go—you don’t have to worry about me.”

Though Qionghua House had also been a brothel, nobody had dared flirt with him there due to his status; he’d never experienced such a thing before in his life. The girls gave each other knowing looks—many clients visited brothels but insisted on pretending to be reserved and upright. They were quite practiced with such customers. One of them approached him and began, “Young Master—”

“I really don’t need anything,” Duan Ling pleaded. “P-please… I’m serious.”

It wasn’t as if Duan Ling hadn’t thought about sex or marriage. His good friends from before, like Batu and Helian Bo… They were probably married by now, and he didn’t even know if Cai Yan was dead or alive. In theory, Duan Ling wanted a family someday too, like his father and mother had.

But the many twists and turns of his life had also influenced the way he thought about relationships. The first time he’d witnessed a man and woman together intimately was when, as a child, he’d happened upon Lang Junxia and Ding Zhi; it was like a dream he’d never forgotten, flashing in full-color detail through his memory. The shock he’d experienced that night had left him with a poor initial impression of brothels. Later, Duan Ling had treated the girls in Qionghua House as his father did, with a respectful and gentlemanly attitude. Those women were all pitiful people who had lost their homes and families—how could he treat them the way Yelü Dashi did?

Thinking about it now, Duan Ling realized he’d never even fallen in love before. Maybe it was hopeless—there were some things in life one simply couldn’t control.

Chapter 53

DUAN LING COLLAPSED back against the divan as the girls stared at him. He tried again to dismiss them with a wave, saying sincerely, “Please go back, I only want to rest.”

One girl left to fetch the madam, who bustled in and explained, “Young Master, the girls are only here to drink with you.”

“No need,” Duan Ling said. “The bill will be paid either way. Just ask the gentleman in the other room to cover it.”

The madam’s eyes lit with understanding, though she wouldn’t expose Duan Ling so bluntly. Still, she couldn’t leave a guest unattended. “Then I’ll send a zither player to serve you instead, my lord.”

Duan Ling nodded, figuring that was fine, and the madam left to pass on the message. A short while later, a boy stepped through the doors. Duan Ling was flabbergasted.

The boy was pretty and soft-spoken; he sat close beside Duan Ling and asked, “Would you like a massage, Gongzi?”

Duan Ling waved him off politely, saying, “You can leave, too. There’s no need.”

The boy appeared stunned. *Well since he’s already here*, Duan Ling thought, *he might as well stay.* He changed his tune: “Wait, forget it. You can stay, but don’t let anyone else in.”

The boy settled down and poured a cup of wine for Duan Ling.

“I don’t drink,” Duan Ling said.

He was always afraid that if he babbled thoughtlessly in his sleep or while drunk, he would inadvertently endanger himself, so he stayed away from alcohol. Setting down the wine, the boy picked up some food and brought it to Duan Ling’s lips. Duan Ling was stricken by this gesture, as if thunder drummed in his core. But he didn’t have the heart to show the boy disdain—they were all just trying to make a living, after all—so he accepted the food and even praised him: “You’re very good-looking.”

“You’re very good-looking too, my lord,” the young man demurred, smiling.

“Those with good looks,” Duan Ling began, his voice suddenly laden with emotion, “will always be at an advantage. The world they see seems more peaceful because ordinary people will easily smile at them.”

The boy hadn’t expected Duan Ling to begin spouting philosophical platitudes and grinned awkwardly.

“There’s no need to serve me. Just have a seat,” Duan Ling said, casually pointing to the other side of the divan.

The boy had no choice but to quietly shift over to sit where he was directed.

“You’ll still get paid for your time,” Duan Ling assured him. “Just think of this as a short break.”

The boy hadn’t expected Duan Ling to have such a commanding aura; he felt he couldn’t do anything but obey. After sitting idle for a spell, he asked, “What foods do you like, Gongzi? I’ll have the kitchen make something for you.”

“Wontons,” Duan Ling said. “But I just ate some. Fruit would be nice.”

The boy bowed and stepped out. The madam came to question him, but all Duan Ling caught was the boy’s “He didn’t like me” before he pattered away down the hall.

What a relief, he thought. *It’d be best if they stopped bothering me.*

As he lounged on the divan, he saw there were grapes set out. Grapes were rare, so he plucked a few. The taste was both sour and sweet, and the more he ate, the more he enjoyed it. He held the plate in his hand, digging in as he ruminated on his current life. Normally, tasks and problems and information piled up endlessly, leaving him helpless to catch his breath. But now he found he had a little time to mull things over—things such as the marriage arrangement Mu Kuangda and Chang Pin had discussed the previous night.

On the sixth day of the twelfth month, he would turn sixteen. If his father were still alive, he would definitely find Duan Ling a wife, but Duan

Ling himself had never considered this problem. It felt far too distant from him. Was he supposed to be like the false crown prince and marry a girl from a prominent family to form an alliance? In the past, when spring had come, lust had coursed through his body in search of a release, but these days he no longer felt much in the way of desire.

When had that happened? Perhaps it was after he'd arrived in Xichuan and been poisoned by Lang Junxia. Duan Ling's voice was slightly hoarse even now; he still wasn't fully recovered.

What kind of wife did he want—and what kind of son did he want? Duan Ling didn't think he could be a good father; he wasn't ready. And if he couldn't give his child happiness, then he didn't want children. His life was hanging by a thread; how could he place those burdens onto a child? His own father had wandered the land without seeing him once until thirteen years after he was born, and Duan Ling had loved him deeply. But ultimately, he felt he'd had enough of that type of suffering. He wouldn't consider marrying until he regained his rightful position—yet it was possible he would never achieve this goal. And even if all his royal ancestors watched over him and fate returned him his throne, it certainly wouldn't be easy to be his child and have to live surrounded by court politics.

It was much better to be someone ordinary.

Duan Ling's thoughts strayed as far and wide as the notes of the flute and the strumming of strings from outside, never-ending and ever-changing. A knock interrupted his reverie, and the door slid open once more.

"The madam asked me to serve you, sir," a deep, masculine voice said.

The man who stepped in was large and burly, wearing a short white robe that hung open over his chest. He held a food box and kicked the door closed behind him.

Duan Ling nearly choked on his tea.

The strapping man rushed forward to pat his back. "Young Master?"

"Sit down!" Duan Ling said. When the man moved as if to feed him a grape, he added: "And don't move."

The man had bulging muscles, a tanned complexion, and rugged brows; he had the obvious strength and charm of a valiant man. He smiled stiffly at Duan Ling, who felt like his soul had left his body. Duan Ling dropped his face into his hand, utterly speechless.

Wherever the madam had found this man, he couldn't have been a courtesan at Qunfang Pavilion. He was probably a hired guard who did odd jobs around the brothel.

"You're very handsome, Young Master. Shall I sing you a song?" the man asked.

"Brother, there's no need. You can just sit and rest."

The man nodded. "Where are you from?"

Duan Ling sat in confounded silence.

"Qunfang Pavilion's madam paid me to be here," the man continued, "so you gotta order me to do something. I'll admit I didn't really want to at first, but since you're quite handsome…"

"Let's have a drink," Duan Ling said, thinking that life was hard for everyone. He replaced his own wine with more tea and motioned that the man should drink as well.

The strapping man was more than happy to sit drinking wine and eating meat. When he'd had his fill, he said to Duan Ling: "Thank you for the meal, Young Master. Now that I'm full, should we…"

Duan Ling had truly had enough. He exclaimed, "Just sit there!"

The man could do nothing but obey.

Some time later, a rap sounded on the door. Duan Ling, driven halfway to insanity, wailed, "Who is it *now*?"

"Me," Wu Du said. When he pushed open the door to see the burly man sitting beside Duan Ling, he stopped and stared.

For a moment, neither of them said a word. A myriad of expressions crossed Wu Du's face before he finally asked: "What's this?"

The man started to explain, but Duan Ling buried his face in his hands and cut him off, afraid things would only get worse. He shooed the man out.

Wu Du was left alone with Duan Ling, who gave him a questioning look. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“The madam asked me to come see you,” Wu Du said casually. “As the young master doesn’t seem to like men or women, I’ll have to serve you myself.”

Duan Ling burst into laughter, while Wu Du remained exasperated. He looked Duan Ling up and down. “Do you have the same…affliction as Mu Qing?”

“Huh?” Duan Ling asked, confused. “What affliction?”

“Forget it, forget it.” Wu Du didn’t want to explain it to him either, so he sat down on the divan.

“Has your friend not come yet?” Duan Ling asked.

“No,” Wu Du said. “I was thinking about it more, and we should just go back.”

Wu Du must have been considering this over the course of the night. Would he really leave the prime minister’s residence and seek another master? Or would he stay? Duan Ling hoped Wu Du wouldn’t leave, or his own situation would become even more precarious—but for Wu Du, it was an important decision and should be properly reasoned through. Duan Ling didn’t dare pry into his thoughts, so they sat together in silence. Duan Ling lay down and rested his head on Wu Du’s thigh, while Wu Du’s mind wandered, his gaze vacant.

“Let’s go,” he said finally. “Home.”

Duan Ling sighed with relief; it seemed Wu Du planned on staying in the prime minister’s residence after all. Yet at that precise moment, a voice outside called, “Sir, your friend has arrived and is waiting next door.”

“I’ll go speak to him for a bit,” Wu Du said. “Wait here. It’ll just be a few minutes.”

Duan Ling nodded, and Wu Du slipped out the door.

In the Tianzi Room across the way, the lighting was dimmer. Wu Du pushed the door open to enter, and an attendant closed it behind him.

“It’s been some time since we saw each other, Wu-qing. Please sit.”

Lang Junxia sat to one side, pouring wine into a cup, while Cai Yan occupied the center of the divan. He offered Wu Du a smile and a nod.

Wu Du took a step forward and dropped to one knee. “Greetings, Your Highness.”

Cai Yan hurried forward to help him up, but he’d barely touched him when Wu Du stood and stepped backward. Cai Yan gestured him toward a seat, but Wu Du remained standing, silent.

“Are you in that much of a hurry?” Lang Junxia asked mildly.

Wu Du nodded and took a deep breath. “Please speak, Your Highness.”

“The last time we met was at Ming Academy in Shangjing,” Cai Yan said. “So many years have passed in the blink of an eye. I wanted to invite you to drink a cup of wine during the Qixi Festival to pay tribute to my royal father’s heroic spirit, but as I’ll be unable to leave the palace then, I came to see you in advance.”

“I offended Your Highness back then, and I deserve death for it. Everyone has their own master; I had no choice at the time,” Wu Du replied.

“As you say, everyone has their own master. Of course I will not blame you,” Cai Yan said, still smiling. “Wu-qing, are you going to continue standing while talking to me?”

Only at this repeated urging did Wu Du take a seat.

“This cup is to thank you for retrieving my father’s body,” Cai Yan said. He waited until Lang Junxia placed the cup before Wu Du and raised his own. Wu Du picked up his cup and, presuming they wouldn’t try to pull anything with an actual master of poisons, tipped the wine back with the other two.

“I wasn’t able to meet with you before this not because I didn’t want to, but because I couldn’t get away,” Cai Yan explained.

Wu Du held his silence for a long moment, then glanced carefully between Lang Junxia and the crown prince, Li Rong.

“When my father was alive,” Cai Yan continued, “only two people remained loyal to him. One was Wuluohou, and the other was you. After I

returned to court, my first thought was to bring you into the palace to serve me—but as I already had Wuluohou, I thought monopolizing you would be a waste of your talent, and I made other arrangements. I'm sure you understand, so I won't go into the rest of the details."

Wu Du was taken rather aback, but as understanding dawned on him, he narrowed his eyes. Lang Junxia gazed at the cup of wine in front of him, maintaining his silence.

"During morning court today, Prime Minister Mu submitted a memorial regarding moving the capital. I thought we shouldn't wait any longer to see one another," Cai Yan said. "Meeting you tonight is a risk for both of us, but with the move of the capital, there will also be changes in personnel. If I didn't speak to you now, it would be even harder for you to get away."

Cai Yan watched Wu Du expectantly, as if hoping for some reaction, but both Lang Junxia and Wu Du were like a pair of wooden statues. Silence prevailed.

"Wu-qing, what's on your mind?" he prompted gently. "You may speak freely."

Wu Du sighed. "When Your Highness was furious and punished me for failing to protect the late emperor, I thought you truly desired my death. Now I can put this worry to rest."

He approached Cai Yan, knelt before him, and prostrated himself. Cai Yan hastily came forward to help him rise—sincerely, this time—and pulled him up to stand.

"I've wronged you." Cai Yan's eyes had gone red and teary. "After the capital is moved to Jiang Prefecture, I must establish a force of imperial bodyguards. I haven't decided what to call it yet, but those whom I appoint to lead it must be those I trust. After much thought, you are the only suitable candidate."

Wu Du fell silent again.

"My plan is to combine this new imperial guard with the original shadow squad to create an intelligence organization that can spy on our enemies as well as investigate domestic affairs," Cai Yan continued. "Since

you are already under Prime Minister Mu's command, he will not suspect me of planting you."

Wu Du frowned slightly. Lang Junxia, observing his expression, saw that he seemed caught in some dilemma. "Your Highness…" Wu Du began.

"You don't have to give me an answer now." Cai Yan raised a hand to forestall him. "You'll have plenty of time to think about it after you go back. At this time, I just wanted to thank you, but rewarding you with treasures and gold would only sully your pure heart…"

When Wu Du heard this, his eyes grew red at the rims. After Li Jianhong's death, Wu Du had rushed to Shangjing and recovered Emperor Wulie's body. When he'd returned to court with it, Li Yanqiu had exploded in a rage and had him detained; a few months later, when Wuluohou Mu had returned with the crown prince, the crown prince, too, wanted him sentenced to death. It was Mu Kuangda who had submitted the appeal that saved his life.

Over all those days, nobody had tried to understand him or sympathized with him. Now those invisible shackles seemed to fall away at this acknowledgment of his pure heart.

Chapter 54

“ONLY A CUP OF WINE can convey my feelings,” Cai Yan said, offering Wu Du a second cup.

Wu Du drank it quietly. “It’s a little bitter,” he murmured.

“Hm?” hummed Cai Yan, whose attention had wandered. But Wu Du merely shook his head with a slight smile as he studied Cai Yan.

Cai Yan hated being examined by others. Wu Du’s stare made him uneasy. Lang Junxia stood up, as if recognizing some cue, and placed a seal in front of Wu Du.

As Wu Du’s gaze shifted to the seal, Cai Yan said, “Use this to withdraw money from any of the four money houses—Tongbao, Changlong, Yunji, or Qianxing—as well as their respective branches. You can use the funds to recruit subordinates. No fingerprints are necessary for signing the paperwork, only the stamp.”

Wu Du was once more taken aback. He braced his hands on his knees and stood. “I’m afraid I must disappoint Your Highness’s high expectations. I cannot accept this offer.”

A hush fell over the room; for a moment, none of them spoke. At last Wu Du sighed and said, “The late emperor found me worthy, something I will always remember. I’ll help you however I can, though I don’t know how useful I’ll be.”

Cai Yan’s face had gone stiff, but when he heard the conclusion of Wu Du’s short speech, he smiled, relieved. “Wu-qing, let me tell you something honestly: In all the world, I can’t think of anyone I trust besides Wuluohou and yourself.”

Wu Du returned the smile with a slight one of his own, nodded, and cupped his hands in a bow toward Cai Yan. “I’ll say farewell here.”

“You haven’t yet drunk the third cup,” Lang Junxia said.

“I’ll drink it in the future. I have to find the Guardian for His Highness first, or I’m not worthy of drinking that last cup.”

With this, he strode out the door and was gone.

Cai Yan and Lang Junxia sat quietly after the door closed behind him, the seal resting on the table between them. Cai Yan resisted the urge to hurl his cup to the floor, afraid Wu Du would hear the porcelain shattering and discover his loss of composure.

“He doesn’t trust you yet,” Lang Junxia finally said. “Sentimental men are like this. They may become devoted to you because of a single word you say, or hold a deep grudge against you for a single slight. It was a mistake to allow him to settle in the Mu manor.”

“What good would it have done me to kill him? Surely anyone would understand my intent in sending him there,” Cai Yan said.

“Not everyone sees things clearly.”

“But I’ve already explained it to him,” Cai Yan said, somewhat helpless.

“Rationally, he accepted your explanation,” Lang Junxia said. “But not emotionally.”

“Then is he committed? Or is he just saying so?”

“People like him need to be coaxed,” Lang Junxia replied.

Cai Yan was silent for a span. “Lang Junxia, I beg you—again. Won’t you stay with me?”

“Don’t ask me this,” Lang Junxia said. “You simply need to coax him often; show him you’re sincere. You’ll win him over sooner or later, and he can replace me.”

Cai Yan opened his mouth to retort, but Lang Junxia cut him off: “He will protect you. Besides, he doesn’t know anything. My sins, however, cannot be redeemed in this lifetime; in the next life, and even the one after that, I will go to hell, burned by raging fire, thrown on a mountain of knives and plunged in a sea of flame, my belly sliced open and my tongue pulled out—never to be absolved.” He stood, preparing to leave.

“But what use is it worrying about your death when you have the rest of your life still to live?” Cai Yan pleaded. “You killed one person, but in doing so, saved the empire. And I’ve already sworn that, no matter what, I’ll never…”

Lang Junxia shifted his gaze to Cai Yan. “In my mind, I myself am the executioner that cuts my body into a thousand pieces.”

Cai Yan stared at Lang Junxia and didn’t say a word.

Across the hall, Duan Ling was lying on the divan, eating grapes and flipping through a book of erotic paintings.

The paintings piqued his interest, though he wasn’t sure if it was the alluring ambiance of the brothel that spurred his animal desires, making his blood rush with passion, or if it was simply his youthful spirit. Still, he’d be mortified to do himself any of what was depicted in this book. Duan Ling flipped back and forth between pages, his mouth strangely dry. He held a grape on his tongue but didn’t bite it, instead rolling it back and forth between his teeth.

Wu Du slid the door open. Duan Ling immediately closed the book of erotica, wiped saliva from the corner of his mouth, and awkwardly tidied his robe. Sitting up, he asked, “Back already?”

Perhaps because of what he’d just seen, an unaccountable feeling arose within Wu Du as he looked closely at Duan Ling. The atmosphere between Wuluohou Mu and the crown prince had been extremely heavy, but when he returned to the room with Duan Ling, it was as though the colors of the world subtly brightened.

“Are you okay?” Duan Ling asked, sensing his mood.

Wu Du shook his head. He came and sat beside Duan Ling on the divan. “Let’s wait a bit. Let them head out before we do.”

He appeared to have been pressed or persuaded; his eyes were a little red, as if he was about to cry. Duan Ling looked at him for a moment before reaching out, resting an arm on his shoulder and patting the back of his head. Wu Du shook himself, returning to his senses.

“Who was it?” Duan Ling asked.

“The crown prince.”

It was as though lightning had struck Duan Ling’s brain, exploding in his ears with a loud *crash*; a flurry of complicated emotions surged within him. “The crown prince is in the opposite room?”

What a close call, he thought, as Wu Du explained what had happened during the meeting. Duan Ling couldn't hear him. His mind raced with one thought after another, all snared and tangled before they shattered into fragments. His distraction lasted for several moments, until he finally turned back to Wu Du with an odd expression on his face.

Now it was Wu Du's turn to be puzzled. "What's with you?"

Duan Ling shook his head.

"Did you drink?" he asked, frowning. He leaned in and sniffed Duan Ling's breath, but he didn't smell alcohol.

Duan Ling was still thinking about the supposed crown prince. Why had he requested an audience with Wu Du? In truth, Wu Du had explained it, but Duan Ling hadn't heard a word. It was Wu Du's proximity that brought Duan Ling back to his senses. Their faces were so close together that Duan Ling, upon realizing it, immediately flushed. Wu Du also felt the charged air to be a little uncomfortable; he casually patted his cheek and said, "Hey."

Yet somehow this action seemed even more flirtatious. Wu Du had slapped Duan Ling before and it hadn't meant anything, but now it was awkward between them. Duan Ling was shaken.

Wu Du could hear a girl outside laughing and seeing visitors down the stairs. Figuring Lang Junxia and the crown prince next door had left, he said, "Let's go too."

Gathering himself, Duan Ling nodded and stood with Wu Du. Yet they'd just exited the room when the door to the Tianzi Room opened as well, and Cai Yan and Lang Junxia stepped out.

Duan Ling froze. The corridor stairs would force them to run into each other; there was no way to avoid them.

Cai Yan, in one hurried glance, spotted a young man trailing behind Wu Du.

"Huh, that wasn't them leaving just now?" Wu Du was surprised, too, and said to Duan Ling, "I guess we'll go say another goodbye."

Duan Ling had barely a second to think. He made a move that shocked Wu Du as well: He threw his arms around Wu Du's neck, stood on

his tiptoes, and pulled his head down. Wu Du flushed instantly; he had no idea what to do with his hands.

“They mustn’t find out,” Duan Ling whispered hastily into his ear. He cupped Wu Du’s cheek with one hand and leaned in as if to kiss him. Wu Du still hadn’t fully processed what was happening, but he cooperated with Duan Ling’s subterfuge and pinned him to the wall.

“If they learn you brought someone from the prime minister’s residence, they’ll think you’re leaking information,” Duan Ling whispered.

He and Wu Du’s noses brushed against each other. Duan Ling knit his brows. Doing this made it seem as if Wu Du was embracing a brothel boy on his departure, saying an intimate goodbye like he thought no one was around to see.

“Aha.” Wu Du stared into Duan Ling’s eyes for a moment and then abruptly said, “Well, don’t get too into the act. Don’t tell me you’re actually…”

As their breath mingled, Duan Ling noticed himself having a strange reaction and was seized with awkwardness, but he didn’t dare pull away. Their gazes were locked, each taking in the other’s face. Duan Ling’s heartbeat quickened. He glanced away for a split second, but almost immediately returned to gazing into the depths of Wu Du’s eyes. He’d suddenly realized this guy’s nose was beautiful—he hadn’t noticed it before, but now, he saw Wu Du had the kind of looks that grew on you with every glance.

“Say something…?” Duan Ling whispered when the silence became too much to bear.

“If you were a girl, I’d have no choice but to marry you after you threw yourself at me like this,” Wu Du said.

“Is there a girl you like?” Duan Ling asked, desperately changing the subject. But the instant he spoke, he realized the question sounded more like he was preparing to confess his feelings, which made the atmosphere even *more* awkward.

“In the past, yes,” Wu Du said. “Not anymore. I’ll tell you about it another time.”

Only after they heard the sound of footsteps descending the stairs did they separate. Duan Ling was afraid the other pair would see him if they turned around, so he hurried back into the room.

“Are they gone?” he asked from inside the doorway.

Wu Du didn’t answer, distracted.

“Wu Du?” he prompted.

Only then did Wu Du jolt back to his senses. “Yeah,” he said. “But let’s wait a bit longer.”

Duan Ling waited until Wu Du finally called, “All right, we can go now.”

He stepped out again, and they descended the stairs together. Observing Duan Ling's obvious anxiety, Wu Du commented, "You're honestly pretty calculating."

"Life as a calculating person is tiring," Duan Ling sighed.

"You can sell me out when we get back," Wu Du said. "Maybe the prime minister will reward you with a mansion."

"What did you say earlier after 'crown prince'?" Duan Ling asked, keeping his voice level. "I was too shocked to get the rest. Can you say it again? I'll remember it properly this time so I can sell you out tomorrow."

Wu Du laughed, and they left Qunfang Pavilion.

Inside their carriage, Cai Yan lifted the dividing curtain and said to Lang Junxia in the driver's seat, "The person who left just before us—was he from the Mu manor?"

"I didn't get a clear look," Lang Junxia said. "The carriage was already leaving when we came out, but it was similar to Mu manor's from what I could see."

"Did Wu Du bring him?" Cai Yan frowned.

Lang Junxia reined the horses to a halt and paused before answering. "Not necessarily. Wu Du may have been followed…but someone tailing him in secret wouldn't use the Mu manor's own carriage."

On the street, the crowd had thinned, and the market was quieting down as the few remaining stalls closed for the night. Wu Du and Duan Ling walked side by side.

"So what if the crown prince wants to recruit me?" Wu Du was saying. "It's no surprise he's got his eye on your Master Wu's skills."

"All skills, whether in scholarship or martial arts, must be paid to the emperor," Duan Ling said. "That won't change. But then, what are you going to do about Prime Minister Mu?"

Wu Du thought for a moment and shook his head. After hearing Wu Du's explanation for the second time, Duan Ling more or less understood

that the false crown prince wanted a new right-hand man. If Lang Junxia was the one who'd brought the false crown prince into the city, the prince would sooner or later need to eliminate the only person who knew he was a fraud. With Lang Junxia dead, he could rest easy.

But Lang Junxia wasn't an easy man to kill; the crown prince would need an assassin of his own. And who better to fill this role than Wu Du?

"I won't act against the interests of the prime minister for now, but we'll have to see if my luck holds in the future," Wu Du said.

Their stroll took them down the street and into a small alley leading back to the prime minister's residence.

"If it were me," Duan Ling said, "I might agree to serve him, but I would keep my options open. How should I put it…? How does that saying go—you have to find yourself first—"

Duan Ling stopped mid-sentence.

Wu Du knit his brows and followed Duan Ling's line of sight to the man standing at the other end of the alley.

Lang Junxia.

Chapter 55

THERE WAS NOWHERE to hide. The lanterns in the alley clearly illuminated Duan Ling, and Lang Junxia stared at him with an inscrutable expression. Duan Ling had no time to process the complex emotions making their way across Lang Junxia's face.

They stood facing one another like stone statues. Time slowed, yet also quickened, as if a million years flew by in a single second.

"What is it now?" Wu Du called out, breaking the silence.

"I saw a carriage from the prime minister's manor leaving Qunfang House," Lang Junxia said. "I didn't see it clearly, but I assume someone followed you from the residence. His Highness told me to remind you that if anyone asks you about our meeting, there's no need to hide anything. You may answer with the truth."

"Got it," Wu Du said.

Lang Junxia studied Duan Ling, as if he wanted to say something, but he held himself back. He climbed back up onto the driver's seat of the carriage, waiting further down the alley. As it passed them by, heading back down the road, Wu Du nodded to him.

"Well, he ended up seeing you after all," Wu Du said, turning to Duan Ling.

"I guess I couldn't hide forever," Duan Ling said.

The day of discovery had finally come, but it had happened so suddenly it caught him off guard. He wasn't remotely ready, but perhaps this, too, was part of his destiny. Duan Ling was no longer afraid.

You're the one who should be afraid, Duan Ling thought. *As long as I'm alive, you'll never find peace.*

A muffled thunderclap resounded in the distance, and a torrential rain poured from the sky without warning. Duan Ling and Wu Du sprinted for home like drowned rats, splashing through puddles along the way, completely soaked in an instant. Wu Du shouted something at him.

“What did you say?!” Duan Ling shouted back.

Wu Du was afraid Duan Ling would ruin his new robes. He scooped him into his arms and quickly dodged across the muddy ground into the courtyard.

The lamps were soon lit, warming the room. As Duan Ling watched the heavy rain through the window, it was as if he had returned to a stable, peaceful kingdom—one where only he and Wu Du existed. As long as he stayed within these walls, nobody could hurt him.

Lang Junxia knew he had survived. But he wouldn’t say anything, or he and that false crown prince he’d propped up would die miserably. According to the laws of Southern Chen, death by a thousand cuts would be the lightest possible sentence for impersonating a member of the royal family. The only way Lang Junxia could kill him was assassination, but who would dare accept a job targeting the prime minister’s own residence? Duan Ling only now realized his father’s martial arts skills had truly been unrivaled—the night he’d rescued Batu and Kuchi, he’d entered and exited the heavily guarded residence as if it was uninhabited.

Lang Junxia couldn’t do the same, and he couldn’t leave the palace easily or often. All Duan Ling had to do was ensure he was always by Wu Du’s side, never leaving him for more than a moment. Lang Junxia wouldn’t act rashly—if he stirred Mu Kuangda’s suspicions, trouble would surely follow. Why would the crown prince’s personal bodyguard bother to kill an otherwise-unknown boy? Something would obviously be fishy; it would be a fatal move to provoke such questions.

But Duan Ling couldn’t say anything either. He didn’t know if Mu Kuangda was friend or foe, and considering the current situation, he certainly had more enemies than friends. He had to resign himself to this absurd balancing act. It was as if he and Lang Junxia were walking a tightrope together between looming mountains: If they weren’t careful, both would plunge to their deaths.

As he contemplated how to stick close to Wu Du, he couldn’t help shooting him a glance. Wu Du had shuffled out of his wet robes and changed into a pair of dry trousers when he got back, leaving his lean, muscular back and shoulders bare. He was currently rummaging through the medicine drawers to find herbs for a warming tea. Wu Du tossed a few

pieces of ginger into the teapot and added some brown sugar; he'd even found some dried osmanthus flowers in his search. Duan Ling stared intently at him as he worked. Wu Du turned his head, and their eyes collided; for a moment they simply looked at each other.

Wu Du felt slightly off-balance. "What are you looking at?" he asked. "Don't get any ideas."

This perplexed Duan Ling. If Wu Du hadn't said it like that, his mind wouldn't have made the leap—but now that he'd summoned the possibility, Duan Ling had to admit Wu Du's figure was quite nice to look at, as sleek as a leopard's.

"If someone tries to kill me…" Duan Ling began.

Now it was Wu Du's turn to be baffled.

Wu Du wondered for a minute if this boy had lost his marbles. He put the lid on the teapot and reached over to check Duan Ling's temperature with the back of his hand. Duan Ling smacked him away.

"I think that man wanted to kill me," Duan Ling said. "Did you see how he looked at me? After all, I…I know too much since I was there at your meeting."

"Wuluohou Mu wouldn't touch you unless he really had nothing better to do," Wu Du replied impatiently. "And anyway, he wouldn't dare provoke me."

"But what if he did?" Duan Ling pressed.

Wu Du eyed Duan Ling strangely. "There's no *what if*. Even if he wanted to kill you to seal your lips, I would detect him the moment he set foot in this courtyard. He saw us together, so he knows you're with me. Why would he try to kill you?"

"But it's raining so hard outside, it'll cover the sound of footsteps."

"Enough!" Wu Du snapped.

Duan Ling shut his mouth. Wu Du thought Duan Ling was acting odd, so after the ginger tea was done steeping, he told Duan Ling to drink some and go to sleep.

"Can I sleep with you?" Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du stared. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, can I sleep at the foot of your bed?”

“Careful. I might just trample you to death when I get up in the middle of the night for water.”

Duan Ling thought it best not to respond.

After finishing his own ginger tea, Wu Du put the bowl aside. He watched in puzzlement as Duan Ling began moving his bedding from the corner to the floor at the foot of Wu Du’s bed.

“What are you trying to do here?” he asked.

Duan Ling nearly blurted out the truth right then and there, but he was afraid he wouldn’t be believed. Besides, even if he told Wu Du the real story, he didn’t know if Wu Du would sell him out—though he really didn’t think he would.

Of course, in the past he’d thought the same of Lang Junxia.

“I’m scared he’ll come through the window to kill me,” Duan Ling said, pointing to the window in the corner.

Wu Du didn’t know what to say. “Listen: Neither Wuluohou Mu, nor Zheng Yan, nor Changliu-jun would dare enter my room without my permission. If anyone managed to set foot inside and so much as touch you, I’d give them my own head too as a prize.”

Still stubborn, Duan Ling looked Wu Du square in the eye. “But you’re about to go to sleep.”

“I’m going to sleep, not dying!”

Duan Ling answered him with an anxious silence.

Wu Du found Duan Ling’s behavior confounding. He’d been acting queer since they left Qunfang Pavilion—normal one minute then paranoid the next, terrified someone would murder him.

“Can you sense movement around you when you’re asleep?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du stared at him again. “Have you lost your mind? Let me make you a sedative.”

Duan Ling hurriedly waved his hands and lay down in his bedding. Wu Du snapped his fingers, extinguishing the lamps with a breeze. Though he'd been disdainful of Duan Ling's fear, he didn't make him move his bedding back to the corner; he rolled over and went to sleep.

Duan Ling dozed for a while before waking again. He lay in the dark and listened to Wu Du's steady breathing. He was sleeping deeply.

The murmur of the wind and rain outside gradually subsided.

Could Wu Du really sense movement in his sleep? Duan Ling crept out from under his covers, but Wu Du didn't so much as twitch. He raised a hand and struck at Wu Du's neck—this time, Wu Du reacted lightning fast, blocking Duan Ling's attack with his left hand while his right flashed out and grabbed him by the throat.

Duan Ling stilled in silence.

"Are you insane?!" Wu Du exploded.

"Okay, okay," Duan Ling conceded. "I'll go back to sleep."

Wu Du rolled over and got up, hauling Duan Ling up to sit on the bed. "What's the matter with you today?" he asked in bewilderment.

"I feel like I heard too many things I shouldn't have today. I'm afraid I'll be killed by uh…Wu-something."

Exasperated, Wu Du repeated: "It's impossible. *Impossible*."

Duan Ling nodded hastily. Seeing his earnest expression, Wu Du realized Duan Ling was truly afraid; his reassurances hadn't dispelled his worries. After some thought, he changed tactics. Instead of insisting Wuluohou Mu had no good reason to kill him, he asked, "What, you don't trust my skills?"

"I do."

Wu Du mulled that over, then continued, "Before, weren't you unafraid of death? When did you start cherishing your life?"

Now that he said it, Duan Ling found it strange too. That was right—hadn't he been unafraid of death? Why had he become so fearful now?

He considered the question. "I wasn't afraid of death before," he said seriously, "because I thought I was alone in the world. Now I'm afraid of

death because…I think my life still has purpose.”

“What purpose?”

As Duan Ling stared at Wu Du, the situation suddenly seemed awfully amusing. He slipped off the bed and lay back down in the blankets he’d arranged at the foot of Wu Du’s bed to try and fall asleep again.

Wu Du leaned over the edge of the bed to peer at Duan Ling, who’d curled up silently on the ground. “Hey.”

“Hmm?”

Wu Du fell silent again. The quiet persisted as he took a deep breath and readjusted himself in bed. A few moments later, just as Duan Ling had stopped paying attention, he reached down and snapped his fingers crisply in front of Duan Ling’s face.

“Remember this,” he said. “I saved your life twice, so nobody can take that life except for me.”

A trace of a smile crossed Duan Ling’s face.

Oddly enough, he fell asleep easily after that.

A furious storm raged that night. Lang Junxia walked down the corridor outside the Eastern Palace, drenched like he’d just been fished from a lake. After changing out of his soaked robes, he removed the prayer beads from around his wrist and stared at the blood staining the wood.

“Lord Wuluohou, His Highness is asking for you,” a servant whispered.

“He hasn’t gone to sleep yet?” Lang Junxia replied.

The maidservant lit his way through the palace corridors, thunder rumbling overhead.

Cai Yan was sitting up in bed, leaning against the headboard still wearing his outer robes. He turned toward Lang Junxia when he entered the room.

“What took you so long?” Cai Yan asked.

There was a pause. “I was reminiscing about the past, so I stopped to watch the rain.”

“What happened?”

“I dealt with it, just as you ordered.” Lang Junxia held the prayer beads in his hand, seemingly distracted.

Cai Yan frowned, finding his behavior odd. “And?”

Lang Junxia was confused by the continuing questions; he raised a brow and stared at Cai Yan.

“Did you see Mu Kuangda?” Cai Yan tried again.

“No,” Lang Junxia replied. “Only Wu Du.”

Cai Yan nodded. The proposal to move the capital lay open on his desk, marked with red ink for approval.

“You’re planning on leaving once this plan is approved,” Cai Yan said. It wasn’t a question.

Lang Junxia rolled the beads between his fingers, worrying one with his thumb. “I recalled that I have some unfinished business here,” he replied. “I won’t leave just yet.”

That answer was a significant surprise to Cai Yan, whose furrowed brow finally relaxed. His face regained some color as he nodded. “Very good… That’s very good.”

“It’s late. You should sleep, Your Highness.”

He turned and left without bidding him farewell.

“He’s not leaving,” Cai Yan murmured to himself. “Very good.”

Chapter 56

BY THE NEXT MORNING, the rain had tapered off. Duan Ling—though he slept fitfully, accompanied by chaotic, tangled thoughts—safely lived to see the dawn.

The events of the previous night already felt like a dream, but nevertheless, he immediately carried on mulling over how to guarantee his safety. Lang Junxia was one of the Four Great Assassins; Duan Ling needed someone at least as skilled as Wu Du or Changliu-jun by his side at all times. Even if he wasn't right next to them, he had to, at a bare minimum, stay within their sight.

But what about during his daily studies? His nights with Wu Du were safe, but should he still go study with Mu Qing during the day? Lang Junxia most likely wouldn't attack during the daytime, Duan Ling thought. Sneaking into the prime minister's residence in broad daylight was far too ambitious. It wasn't completely safe, but—life was full of risks.

After breakfast, Wu Du assembled a new wooden case of ingredients and made ready to leave. Duan Ling trotted along after him.

Turning to scrutinize him, Wu Du realized he was still nervous.

"Where are you going?" Duan Ling asked. "I'll go with you." He took Wu Du's wooden case from him and looked at him expectantly.

Wu Du had little choice but to let Duan Ling accompany him, and entered the prime minister's residence distracted. As they passed through the manor, he whispered, "Do you remember what Wuluohou Mu said last night?"

Duan Ling hadn't been paying close attention to what Lang Junxia was saying at the time—but now that he thought back, he had indeed made an odd comment. "He said a carriage from the prime minister's residence was outside the brothel," Duan Ling said with a frown.

"*Shh*. If Prime Minister Mu asks what we were doing, don't say anything. I'll explain."

Mu Kuangda was taking his breakfast when they arrived. He seemed to have guessed Wu Du would come early in the morning, and directed the servants to offer Wu Du and Duan Ling a cup of tea as soon as they arrived. Changliu-jun sat off to one side, polishing his sword.

Wu Du placed the case in front of Mu Kuangda and opened it to reveal a nine-square grid containing different dried herbs. He unfolded a piece of yellow paper and laid that in front of Mu Kuangda as well.

“The prescription you gave me before had conflicting ingredients for increasing and decreasing internal heat, and the dosage instructions were strange,” Wu Du said. “It would be far too easy for the average physician to detect its poisonous nature. In order to avoid this, I made three significant changes to the formula. I replaced four of the seven herbs and added two more nurturing ingredients to create this version. I’ve named it Nine Souls Soup.”

“Very good,” Mu Kuangda replied. “What are its effects?”

“At first glance, the prescription is designed to invigorate the internal organs, particularly the stomach and spleen, and help with relentless dreams. After taking it, the frequency of the patient’s dreams *will* decrease, but the heartbeat will become irregular during waking hours,” Wu Du explained. “After three doses, the true effects will begin to make themselves known: The patient will become restless, anxious, and confused. If the patient takes sedatives intended to strengthen the heart on top of this drug, their interaction will cause drowsiness—and if continued, the heart will begin to fail. If the patient takes any inflammatory or dryness-inducing medicines with it, like ginseng or desert broomrape, even one dose will do irreparable harm. A few more such doses and he will die, bleeding from all seven orifices.”

“Very good,” Mu Kuangda repeated, satisfied. “And is there an antidote?”

“Ice silkworm molt and snowsnake core,” Wu Du replied. “These two substances can reverse the effects. On the back of the paper are instructions for preparing the antidote.”

Mu Kuangda read over the prescription several times and slowly nodded, admiration in his eyes. “Your reputation is well deserved.”

Wu Du silently sipped his cup of tea.

“The storm was strong last night. Did you sleep well?” Mu Kuangda asked.

Duan Ling immediately caught the deeper meaning behind this question: Mu Kuangda knew about Wu Du’s meeting with the crown prince. Lang Junxia had guessed as much the previous night, and this Wu Du knew as well, though Mu Kuangda didn’t know they knew… All these twists and turns of logic were complicated, but luckily, Lang Junxia had given Wu Du a tip-off, giving them the chance to seize the initiative. Perhaps this was a stroke of luck.

Changliu-jun’s eyes held an amused glint that Duan Ling didn’t quite understand. He suspected the assassin was gloating again.

“We were at Qunfang Pavilion last night,” Wu Du said with a casual frankness. “I took this youngster out to experience a bit of the world.”

“Oh?” Mu Kuangda chuckled. “I imagine you two had a good time.”

Duan Ling’s heart beat quicker with nerves. He remembered what Lang Junxia said—to simply tell Mu Kuangda the truth if he asked—and several more thoughts raced through his mind in short order. The scenario became clear to him: Lang Junxia’s decision to hand the initiative to Wu Du was exceedingly clever. The false crown prince wanted to recruit him, but Wu Du was already in the enemy’s camp; Wu Du could present this information to Mu Kuangda in order to gain his trust and wait for another opportunity in the future. Wu Du would still be Mu Kuangda’s man in name. If he ultimately became a double agent on the crown prince and Lang Junxia’s side, all the better.

Of course, this arrangement would work only with a man as sentimental as Wu Du.

“Not as good as I’d like,” Wu Du replied. “I’m much burdened by the past; after thinking it over, I still owe you, Your Excellency.”

Mu Kuangda was silent a moment, then nodded. There was no need for an intelligent man such as himself to belabor the point with words.

“I’ll never forget how you pled mercy for me, Your Excellency,” Wu Du said finally. “If there is nothing else, I’ll take my leave.”

“Wait.” Before Wu Du could get up, Mu Kuangda gestured toward Changliu-jun, who produced a letter. “I may need to trouble you again,” Mu Kuangda said. “Take a look at this letter first.”

Duan Ling was instantly curious, but he didn’t dare move closer to read it.

“Wang Shan,” Mu Kuangda said, turning to address him. “You follow the young master every day and are ever nearby. Though you are not one of my counselors, I still value your thoughts. You needn’t be so cautious; young people should speak more freely than the old.”

It seemed Mu Kuangda now considered him properly part of the manor as well, in part because of Wu Du’s show of loyalty. He quickly replied, “Yes, Your Excellency.”

Wu Du opened the letter and discovered it was a military report. Though it had no address or signature, it contained a record of military spending, weapons inventory, winter training plans, and even a report on the purchase of Ferghana warhorses from Western Liang for 14,800 taels of silver.

“Do you know this hand?” Mu Kuangda asked.

“It’s Bian Lingbai’s,” Wu Du said. “The commander of defense at Tong Pass, Guanxi’s Pacification Commissioner.”

“Correct,” Mu Kuangda said.

Duan Ling didn’t know this man’s background, so he remained silent. Why would Mu Kuangda show Wu Du this letter? Was he planning to send him out for an assassination?

“Bian Lingbai has been in the army for thirteen years,” Mu Kuangda explained. “He got his start in the Guandong Army, and he’s fought more than twenty battles against the Liao Empire, large and small, with both victories and defeats. When the imperial Yelü clan occupied Shangzi, his attack on the Khitan army’s rear earned him significant merit. After the capital was moved to Xichuan, he was transferred and became the commander in chief of the Guandong Army. Seven years ago, he joined forces with the Tiger General Han Bin and turned traitor at Jiangjun Ridge, where they attempted to usurp the late emperor Li Jianhong’s military power.”

“Kill him?” Wu Du asked lightly.

Mu Kuangda took another sip of tea, backlit by the sun coming through the window behind him. “He was loyal to Zhao Kui,” Mu Kuangda said. “The late emperor was happy to overlook this, but I fear I cannot. Bian Lingbai has been conspiring with Western Liang for some time, secretly expanding his army and buying up horses. The letter you hold in your hand is proof. It details every item in his hidden hoard of military equipment, the embezzlement of military funds, and the exchange with the Tanguts for warhorses. If we don’t take care of him now, he may grow overconfident with a private army behind him and refuse to obey our commands in the future.”

Mu Kuangda had always been one to consider the bigger picture.

“Understood,” said Wu Du. “I’ll set out in a few days.”

Uh oh, Duan Ling thought. *What will I do if you leave?*

“In addition to ending him, you must also collect evidence of his intent to rebel,” Mu Kuangda said.

Wu Du frowned and didn’t immediately respond.

“Wu Du,” Mu Kuangda gently chided. “Killing people cannot be your only skill.”

Mu Kuangda rose and stepped out into the corridor. The summer breeze blew past, jingling the wind chimes.

“I met Bian Lingbai once,” Wu Du said. “He’s ambitious, and given I’m to blame for General Zhao’s death, he surely doesn’t look favorably upon me. He’ll draw his knife before I even sit down.”

“Aren’t you skilled in the art of disguise?” Changliu-jun piped up.

“Disguising myself is only good for infiltration,” Wu Du replied. “If I want to collect evidence of his collusion with the Tanguts or his intent to rebel, I’ll have to interact with him. My speech and gestures won’t deceive his eyes for an extended period of time.”

Mu Kuangda mulled the problem over in silence.

“There’s another way,” Wu Du offered. “I arrest him and bring him back, interrogate him, then hand him over to you. Whether he confesses

under torture or tells the truth will then have nothing to do with his feelings about me."

"That won't do." Mu Kuangda slowly shook his head. "The emperor would certainly spare his life. Even if the evidence is incontrovertible, the worst punishment he would face is military conscription, which will only give him a chance to rally. I need him to die quietly at Tong Pass, not be killed with a fanfare that will incite his army to rebel."

"What if I go too?" Duan Ling blurted out.

The room quieted in an instant. It was a ridiculous suggestion, but Duan Ling didn't know what else to do—if Wu Du left, he was as good as a fish on a chopping block, free for Lang Junxia to slaughter.

"You?!" Wu Du exclaimed, as if he'd heard a bad joke. "This is an assassination!"

But Mu Kuangda appeared pleasantly surprised. He turned his attention to Duan Ling. "You certainly are bold. Let him speak, Wu Du. Tell us, what do you have in mind?"

"Um… I don't have a definite plan," Duan Ling said. "We would need to get there first. Tong Pass, right? Maybe if I pretend to be Zhao Kui's…relative…and show my face instead, General Bian won't be so suspicious?"

Mu Kuangda considered this. Wu Du frowned, ready to stop Duan Ling from speaking any further, but Duan Ling shot him a pleading look.

"It's feasible," Mu Kuangda said. Duan Ling's suggestion had given Mu Kuangda a new idea. He continued, gazing thoughtfully at Duan Ling, "Last year, Bian Lingbai was transferred back to Tong Pass from Jiangjun Ridge. It's been nearly a year since Zhao Kui's death. What identity would you assume to meet him?"

His pointed interest slightly worried Duan Ling. What if the prime minister had noticed something amiss with him—what if he was struck by an epiphany and became suspicious? But this was a gamble he had to take; he reminded himself that Mu Kuangda was only scrutinizing him now because he was considering a suitable identity for him.

“It won’t work to pretend to be Zhao Kui’s son,” Mu Kuangda mused. “He had three sons and one daughter, and they were all beheaded. But what about an adopted son? Wu Du, what say you? Could we get what we want by inciting a rebellion ourselves?”

Such an incitement would be a shrewd and ruthless move.

“But how do we explain Wu Du’s reason for being there with me?” Duan Ling asked.

“Easily done,” Mu Kuangda said. “All you need is a letter. I will officially appoint Wu Du to locate the Guardian of the Realm; he will use this opportunity to contact Bian Lingbai. It’s a believable story.”

“Zhao Kui had a nephew named Zhao Rong,” Wu Du offered. “His father, Zhao Pu, was the vice admiral of the Naval Defense Patrol in Shandong. Four years ago, when Dongying pirates were raiding along the coast, Zhao Pu died of an arrow wound, and Zhao Rong was captured and drowned. Not many people know this; only Zhao Kui received the news of his nephew’s death. We should be able to use his name to establish contact with Bian Lingbai.”

“Excellent,” Mu Kuangda said. “Let me think a bit further on this; it’d be best to accomplish all our goals in one fell swoop. You two may return home and wait for word of my arrangements.”

Chapter 57

"YOU THINK this is a pleasure trip?" Wu Du asked, frowning.

"I want to go with you," Duan Ling said. "I'm staying by your side; I won't go anywhere without you."

Duan Ling's earnest declaration stumped Wu Du. He pressed his hand to his forehead, then flapped a hand at Duan Ling and went inside without another word. Duan Ling gazed after Wu Du's back as he walked away.

Wu Du had no idea what to do with him.

"Aren't you trying to work your way up the ladder?" he asked a few minutes later. "Why do you want to run off to Tong Pass with me instead of cherishing this golden opportunity to study with the young master at home?!"

"I… Well, isn't this also a way to climb the ranks?" Duan Ling asked. He seemed to be keeping something to himself, talking around it. Wu Du sat in the main hall and studied him, looking for the source of the unusual tension roiling beneath this boy's surface.

"What are you hiding from me?" Wu Du asked.

He'd always felt there was something *off* about Duan Ling, but had never been able to put his finger on it—this was the nearest he'd ever come to unearthing the truth.

Faced with such a direct question, Duan Ling almost blurted out the truth. But in the end, he settled for a simpler excuse: "I want to try to find my dad."

Understanding dawned on Wu Du, and his furrowed brow relaxed slightly. He nodded at Duan Ling to continue.

"The last time I saw him was outside Tong Pass. Even if it's impossible, I…still want to try," he said.

“If you’re going, then you have to listen to everything I say while we’re traveling,” Wu Du said. “Don’t act on your own.”

Upon seeing him nod, Wu Du seemed to be mollified. “Pack the bags,” he ordered.

Duan Ling went about packing their things, musing that he’d escaped death once again. Once he left the city, he’d be out of range; even if Lang Junxia wished to kill him, he wouldn’t be able to find him. As for what he’d do after they returned—he’d cross that bridge when he came to it.

As Wu Du watched Duan Ling packing, he abruptly said, “No matter what happens, you mustn’t take your own life, got it?”

Duan Ling turned to face him with a smile. “I won’t. If you’re here, I’ll live.”

Standing in their remote courtyard surrounded by the brilliantly blooming flowers in the garden he tended daily, this handsome young man and his brightly smiling face seemed like something out of a painting. The sight stunned Wu Du into silence.

Later that afternoon, another reward arrived: new travel robes, fine brocade fabrics, money for their journey, and a dagger with which Duan Ling might defend himself. The pair planned their trip through the evening. Duan Ling was particularly excited; it would be his first time going on a proper journey like this.

“When we’re out there, you shouldn’t speak too much,” Wu Du said. “If everything goes as planned, I’ll be disguised as your servant. A young master shouldn’t do too much for himself.”

Duan Ling nodded. He allowed another minute to pass before asking, casually, “What’s ‘the Guardian’?”

Of course he already knew the answer. When he’d heard the legendary sword passed down through the dynasty was lost, he knew it must have happened when Shangjing fell. If he could locate the sword, could *he* command the Four Great Assassins?

“An important weapon of the state,” Wu Du said. “The crown prince is looking for it too.”

“Does Bian Lingbai have it?”

“Not necessarily,” Wu Du said. “But he *was* with the last group of reinforcements that reached Shangjing.”

Privately, Duan Ling suspected it had more likely fallen into the hands of the Mongols or the Khitan army—but since it was missing, he might as well keep an eye out.

They talked well into the night. Just as they were about to go to bed, Mu Kuangda summoned them again. As this was a sensitive mission, the prime minister gave them instructions personally when they arrived in the study.

“Chang Pin has already set out for Jiang Prefectural City, so it’s too late to consult him on strategy,” Mu Kuangda said. “I’ve arrived at a rough plan, but it may not be entirely suitable—he should’ve been the one to plot this. We’ll discuss the plan together, and you let me know if anything seems flawed.”

Mu Kuangda’s proposed plan was for them to present Duan Ling to Bian Lingbai as Zhao Kui’s nephew, who hoped to call on Zhao Kui’s former troops to avenge his uncle. This way, Wu Du wouldn’t need to disguise himself, which significantly reduced their chances of exposure. Duan Ling’s mission would be to win Bian Lingbai’s trust while gathering intelligence, such as any correspondence between Bian Lingbai and Western Liang. He could thus provide Mu Kuangda with more information about what Bian Lingbai was planning, and any hard evidence they collected would kill off any chance of him crowning himself emperor.

After all, the Tanguts and Han could help one another. Western Liang had been a wholly independent country until it was swallowed up by Liao. Now it wavered between the Liao and Chen empires. If all went to plan, Mu Kuangda might win Western Liang’s support to his own side.

Western Liang had its own factions as well. After Helian Bo and his mother had returned to the country last year, the court had split into two groups: One supported the Helian family in throwing off Liao’s control and establishing their independence, while the other believed it was better to bide their time.

Hearing all this gave Duan Ling a headache. He’d volunteered in the interest of preserving his own life; now that he was really thinking about traveling all this way to deceive a high-ranking general he’d never met… It

wouldn’t be easy. He hadn’t been exposed in the Mu residence as of yet—Mu Kuangda had never even inquired about his origins—so he hadn’t had to elaborate much on his background. If he hoped to fool Bian Lingbai, however, he would need to fabricate a whole new set of lies, which was a whole new level of difficulty.

“I’m just worried if he doesn’t believe my story in the first place, we won’t even get a foot in the door,” Duan Ling said.

“That won’t be an issue.” Mu Kuangda smiled like a wily old fox. “We have something he wants. He’ll meet with you.”

He passed over a small wooden box, and Duan Ling opened it to find a yellowed silk scroll painted with mountains, rivers, and various other terrain. Duan Ling looked at it with surprise.

“This was found in the Zhao manor’s storage when the court seized Zhao Kui’s property,” Mu Kuangda explained. “It’s a treasure map.”

Duan Ling’s jaw dropped. The treasure map was as thin as a cicada’s wing, the silk almost translucent.

“Bian Lingbai has coveted this map for a long time, but after Zhao Kui’s assets were confiscated, he couldn’t find it. Even the emperor doesn’t know it exists. I’d anticipated it might be useful someday, so I tucked it away. To go with it, I’ve forged a letter from Zhao Kui, supposedly penned before his death, for you to present.”

Duan Ling, examining the treasure map, asked, “What’s buried here?”

“Wealth enough to rival a nation,” Mu Kuangda said calmly as he sipped his tea. “Zhao Kui prepared a contingency plan before staging his rebellion. In the case that he failed, he would’ve retrieved the treasure and fled west. With a private army of eighty or a hundred thousand soldiers, he could have essentially established a small country of his own. It would certainly have been a way to make a living.”

Thoughtful, Duan Ling tucked away the treasure map.

“Bian Lingbai won’t trust you immediately, of course,” Mu Kuangda reminded him. “You alone won’t be able to gain access to his most closely

guarded secrets. He's ambitious and canny—but given what you can offer him, it shouldn't be impossible to join his army with Wu Du."

Duan Ling saw the plan clearly now: His cover story and the treasure map were unimportant; he only needed to buy time for Wu Du's work. "I understand," he said. "I won't fail in my mission."

Mu Kuangda nodded in satisfaction. "Once you're in, Wu Du, you will need to act as the thief."

"Yes, Your Excellency," Wu Du said.

"Take what documentation you can," Mu Kuangda instructed. "Both his ledgers and his correspondence if you're able. You two discuss the specifics of what to keep or leave behind between yourselves. Before you leave, dispatch him—and we can start negotiating with Western Liang once we have the evidence in hand. Bian Lingbai has been at risk of rebellion for a long time; after Zhao Kui's death, nobody can restrain him. Allowing him to live will result in undue complications down the line. He must be dealt with as soon as possible."

Wu Du nodded again. Mu Kuangda would certainly reward him well if he accomplished this mission. Just as Duan Ling had said, climbing the ranks wasn't easy. This was his first proper assassination mission for Mu Kuangda, and an opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty—refusal wasn't an option.

"What if he's innocent?" Duan Ling asked suddenly.

Wu Du's expression changed in an instant.

Mu Kuangda chuckled and glanced at Duan Ling. Duan Ling realized he should not have, under any circumstances, asked this question—but he'd done it anyway.

"Very well." Mu Kuangda acknowledged him with a slow nod of the head. "If he is innocent, will you kill him or not?"

He'd thrown the ball back into Duan Ling's court, an assessing look in his eyes.

Duan Ling drew breath, about to answer, when Mu Kuangda continued in a leisurely tone, "If he's innocent, you may do as you see fit."

"Yes, Your Excellency," Duan Ling said, relieved.

Mu Kuangda gave him a penetrating look. “Come back as soon as possible,” Mu Kuangda said. “The imperial examination will be held once the capital is moved. You should avoid falling behind in your studies.”

Duan Ling stood and took his leave alongside Wu Du.

On their way back home, Duan Ling pondered their instructions. Mu Kuangda seemed to have crafted a flawless plan. He had emphasized several times before their exit that Bian Lingbai must appear to have died of natural causes. That way, the court could send a general to take command of Tong Pass’s garrison with no risk of mutiny.

“Even if he’s innocent, he has to die,” Wu Du murmured.

“I know,” Duan Ling said. “But if he really is innocent, you won’t do it, right? And neither will I. There aren’t many generals capable of defending the border. If he doesn’t intend to rebel, he shouldn’t die senselessly.”

As they closed the courtyard gate and returned to the privacy of Wu Du’s room, Duan Ling whispered, “We’ll do as Prime Minister Mu ordered for now. If our investigation turns up nothing, you don’t have to execute the mission just to prove your loyalty. If you do, the blame for killing innocents will fall on your head.”

Wu Du turned with knit brows, catching Duan Ling’s eye. A tacit understanding passed between them.

“Go to bed,” Wu Du said. “We’re heading out first thing in the morning; don’t keep yourself up thinking about it.”

As Duan Ling shuffled toward his bedding, Wu Du stopped him. “Sleep in my bed. It’s been raining for days; the floor’s damp.”

Duan Ling accepted without hesitation and slipped beneath the bedcovers to sleep, while Wu Du remained seated at the table, poring over the treasure map in the low light.

What must have been hours later, Duan Ling groggily woke and mumbled, “Aren’t you gonna sleep?”

Wu Du hummed a response. In the dim glow cast by the lamp, he held the treasure map between his fingers, examining every inch of the silk

scroll. Finally, he slid into bed without changing his clothes, lying next to Duan Ling beneath the same shared covers.

Duan Ling blearily turned over and tossed a leg over Wu Du’s waist, instinctively snuggling closer. He pillowed his head on Wu Du’s arm and practically wrapped himself around him. Wu Du was at an utter loss. It would be awkward to shove Duan Ling away, but it seemed even weirder to purposefully hold him close. Being sleepily embraced by a young man like this was strange; his whole body stiffened in response.

Chapter 58

THE NEXT MORNING, Lang Junxia left the palace in the bright, early hours, wearing plain brown robes to mingle with the common folk in the market. He crossed West Street and walked toward the remote side courtyard of the prime minister's manor, stopping just outside the residence and blending into the shadows of the alley opposite.

Across the street, a carriage waited. Duan Ling, dozing on his feet, failed to climb into the carriage even after a few tries; impatient, Wu Du shoved him in, then turned around to purchase their breakfast from a nearby street stall. Wu Du looked fine in his new traveling robes, his sword case slung across his back as he spoke with the wonton stall's owner.

"Half a catty of shrimp filling, and half a catty of pork," Wu Du told the man. Seeming to sense something, he whipped around, scanning the area with a frown.

Lang Junxia retreated further into the alley, out of Wu Du's field of vision. Wu Du paid for the wontons and climbed into the carriage, though he immediately peeled back the curtain to look out. Duan Ling had been barely awake when Wu Du had roughly washed his face and changed his robes for him, then hauled him into the carriage to carry on snoozing. Yet the moment he smelled food, he catapulted into full awareness.

"Breakfast?" He nabbed the chopsticks to pluck wontons from the bamboo tube.

As soon as he'd eaten his fill, he leaned his head against Wu Du's shoulder and fell right back asleep.

"Huh?"

In the manor, Mu Qing woke with a start to find his study companion had already departed. He ran into the streets after them, but the carriage was long gone.

The driver brought them out of the city, speeding along the official road through the late summer landscape. Leaves rustled overhead as the shadows of trees swayed across the carriage, the scenery verdant and the air refreshing. Wu Du pinned the curtains up and slouched back on the bench. With one foot propped on the low stool and his elbows bracing him, he gave off a domineering air. Duan Ling lay on the bench, his head in Wu Du's lap.

The cicadas shrilled without cease. Some time later, Duan Ling rolled over and was woken by the sun on his face.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Wu Du half bathed in pure sunlight, half dappled in the shadows cast by the rustling leaves. Bright spots flew over his face like meteors. Wu Du was mulling something over. He had a slightly roguish air about him when he was silent, as if he was dissatisfied with everything and everyone.

"Finally awake?" Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling yawned. Levering himself up, he leaned out the window for a look. "Whoa!" he exclaimed upon seeing the scenery racing by.

"Don't jump around," Wu Du warned.

Despite the circumstances, Duan Ling was thrilled to be on the road. He leaned over Wu Du to gaze past him out the opposite window. The carriage was small, and there was nowhere for Wu Du to move, so he supported Duan Ling's weight as he craned his neck over him. When Duan Ling had come to Xichuan, he'd traveled through Jiang Prefectural City and crossed Jianmen Pass to enter the four-river region; he'd never taken the road that traversed Hanzhong, and the views along this route were vastly different.

They stopped for a break near a tranquil pond set among lush green wheat fields that seemed to stretch for thousands of miles, at the center of which stood an ancient maple tree. The blue of the sky was a hue so pure it was as if it had been washed clean, and the cicadas' cries were an undulating symphony filling the air. It was a scene straight out of those famous lines: "In the boundless wilderness, the sky merges seamless with the trees."[15]

The driver sat to eat his lunch, and Duan Ling settled down under the tree with Wu Du. Only now did Duan Ling truly absorb the beauty of the Central Plains of which his father had once spoken. Yet Wu Du, at his side, appeared strangely melancholic. He lowered his head and studied the soil under the tree, digging some out with a finger then patting it back into place.

“Is there something there?” Duan Ling asked, curious.

“Cicada sloughs,” Wu Du replied.

Wu Du dug a few out and wrapped them in paper. The driver, having finished his lunch, called out wordlessly to them from the official road, and the two went back to the carriage. Before they left, Wu Du turned and stared at the tree for a lingering moment, as if it held some special meaning for him.

“What is this place?” Duan Ling asked.

“Nowhere,” Wu Du said. “Let’s go.”

Duan Ling had been curious about Wu Du’s past for a while, but Wu Du rarely talked about it, as if he found it embarrassing to bring it up.

“Hey, Wu Du,” Duan Ling mumbled almost to himself as he twirled a green foxtail stalk.

“Hm?”

They sat together in the moving carriage, and the tree receded further and further into the distance.

“Someone died under that tree where we were sitting, didn’t they?” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du frowned. “How did you know?” he asked after a pause.

“There were still traces of blood around the roots,” Duan Ling said. “From not very long ago—maybe no more than a year.”

Wu Du was impressed against his will. “You’re smart,” he said casually.

He must have sat under that tree reflecting for a reason. Duan Ling figured the deceased in question might have been a friend. He hesitated, wondering if he should say something to comfort Wu Du and perhaps get to know him better. Whenever he was alone with Wu Du, he remembered how he’d known next to nothing about Lang Junxia when they were together. Maybe that ignorance was the root of betrayal.

Could the deceased be…Zhao Kui? The timing would match. Duan Ling’s mind painted the picture: Zhao Kui, pursued by his father to this place, dying beneath the tree. Wu Du would’ve had nowhere to escape; his only choice would have been to drop his sword and swear loyalty to his father. He wanted badly to ask, but he was afraid Wu Du would become suspicious if it seemed he knew more than he should.

Yet Wu Du told him without being prompted: “It was General Zhao.”

Duan Ling made a shushing gesture, motioning toward the driver—there were ears everywhere. Wu Du waved a hand in return—*don’t worry*—then rested that hand on Duan Ling. Duan Ling had slumped against him again as soon as they entered the carriage, half reclined and staring off into space as they talked.

Wu Du had a comfortable smell, fresh grass mixed with the clean, masculine scent of a healthy young man. He didn’t spend much time on his

appearance, but Duan Ling felt that made him more approachable; he acted casual and free, like a true rogue swordsman.

“Haven’t you noticed the driver is deaf?” Wu Du asked.

Only then did Duan Ling realize the driver was indeed both deaf and mute. It made sense—Mu Kuangda had assigned this man to them. If the driver couldn’t hear or speak, he couldn’t be captured and tortured for information.

“Did General Zhao treat you well?” Duan Ling asked.

“He was all right,” Wu Du said. “Truthfully, he looked down on me.”

“Why?”

“It was a long time ago,” Wu Du drawled. “I have a shijie, Xunchun. She can play ‘Joyful Reunion’ too; our shiniang taught it to us. And Shiniang had an old lover—General Zhao.”

“What about your shifu?” Duan Ling asked.

“He passed away a long time ago.” Wu Du frowned. “He made himself pills of immortality, believing in some formula he found somewhere, mixed them with mercury, and took himself to ascension.”

Duan Ling wanted to laugh, but didn’t dare in front of Wu Du.

“The emperor before the late emperor,” Wu Du continued. “The current emperor’s father who passed away last year—he believed in all that as well. He spent his days in the palace making pills and taking medicines in search of immortality.”

That’s my grandfather, thought Duan Ling. *But I never met him and don’t have a great impression of him, so say whatever you want.*

“Why did you end up following General Zhao?” Duan Ling asked.

“Because Shiniang died,” Wu Du said. “Liao breached the Great Wall, and my shijie and I left to pursue our own paths. Zhao Kui recruited me, while my shijie went to Shangjing seeking revenge. I don’t know if she’s still alive.”

Xunchun’s fate was fresh in Duan Ling’s mind, but he couldn’t say anything about it to Wu Du. There was still so much he hadn’t sorted through after his flight from the city.

“Is this tattoo also from your sect?” Duan Ling sat up and leaned closer to study the tattoo on the side of Wu Du’s neck. Wu Du looked at him askance as Duan Ling flipped his collar down and tugged it a little to bare more skin. Wu Du blushed, awkwardly yanking his collar back into place. Averting his eyes, he pointed to the bench and gestured for Duan Ling to sit properly.

“Yeah,” he said.

“What’s your sect’s name?” Duan Ling asked.

“Why do you have so many questions?” Wu Du replied, impatient.

“Come on, satisfy my thirst for knowledge,” Duan Ling volleyed back. “Wasn’t it Confucius who said, ‘If I were to gain knowledge in the morning, I could die at sunset without regret’?”

“The White Tiger Sect,” Wu Du answered.

“Never heard of it.”

Wu Du stared at Duan Ling, momentarily speechless. Duan Ling corrected course and said fawningly, “Clearly I’m ignorant, so I’m asking for guidance from Master Wu.”

“Have you heard of the Guardian of the Realm?” Wu Du asked, pacified. “I guess you probably haven’t.”

You puff up the second you’re praised, Duan Ling thought. *Look how pleased you are.*

“It’s a sword,” Duan Ling said.

“Yes, a sword. Forged by the White Tiger Sect.”

Wu Du told the tale: In ancient times, when the legendary Great Yu dynasty crumbled and the realm was thrown into chaos, foreign tribes from beyond the Great Wall had invaded the Central Plains. As a result, the original Nameless Sword was lost to the northern tribes, who melted it down and reforged it into several swords, distributed among them. Later, a gallant Han swordsman called Wanlifu from the White Tiger Sect of Xichuan slew the four chiefs of the four Xiongnu tribes within only three nights. After he retrieved the scattered swords, they were reforged into a single blade once again, which he entrusted to the Li family, who also held the jade disc. Wanlifu established a group of assassins in Xichuan, which he

called the White Tiger Sect. He took on four disciples, to whom he passed down all his martial techniques, and ordered them to follow the wielder of the Guardian to restore glory to their empire.

Thirteen years later, Great Chen was established, and Wanlifu retired, having accomplished his goal. Three of his four disciples left the White Tiger Sect, but despite their departure, they never forgot Wanlifu's teachings. All successors of his school of martial arts were obligated to tattoo a white tiger onto their bodies. These awe-inspiring assassins, who led carefree lives transgressing the law by way of martial arts, were a promise: In troubled times, when the nation was in desperate need, those above rules and politics—the killers hidden in the world—were bound to reappear and change the course of history by dint of their inhuman strength.

Wanlifu himself had been supremely powerful; even his name was the name of a glorious ancient sword, *Chengsheng Wanlifu*—the Triumphant Subjugator. On top of training four disciples, each of whom inherited one of his skills, he taught the Li family the Mountain and River Sword Style and the Roaring Tiger Fist. Though his four disciples eventually went their separate ways, the teachings were passed on, and they and all their disciples bore white tiger tattoos. Wu Du's sect, in particular, had been founded by Wanlifu's youngest disciple.

Duan Ling listened to the story with rapt attention. Few in the outside world knew of these secret affairs of the jianghu, and his father had never shared any details. What he learned was that the Four Great Assassins were all descendants of the White Tiger Sect, and that Wu Du's branch had inherited the most important skill: poisons.

"While she was alive, Shiniang always remembered her duty," Wu Du said. "Shifu passed on early, so she tattooed me herself. But although she passed down our teachings for so many years, nearly everyone has left the sect."

Duan Ling didn't quite understand. "What duty?"

"Poison."

"Poison?" Duan Ling repeated.

"You wouldn't get it."

“Tell me. I really want to know.” Duan Ling sensed that this was terribly important; he stared at Wu Du expectantly.

After a short pause, Wu Du said, “There’s no first place in scholarship, and no second place in martial arts. I’ll put it this way: Do you think it’s possible for someone to be born a martial arts genius and eventually become so powerful that no one can rival their skill?”

“Sure,” Duan Ling agreed.

“I’ve only seen one person like that,” Wu Du said. “The late emperor. Of course, since he was the emperor, I wouldn’t kill him. But what about others?”

Duan Ling longed to hear Wu Du speak more about his father, but Wu Du continued his earnest explanation. “If it wasn’t the late emperor, it would’ve been someone else. Geniuses will always appear. An unrivaled master might even be born among the four branches of the White Tiger Sect. Such a person could kill anyone, at any time, unbound by the rules of the world—he could escape when outnumbered, and fight unmatched when alone. If such a person becomes too strong to be controlled and turns to evil, he will bring disaster upon the world.”

“That’s true,” Duan Ling acknowledged. The stronger a person was, the more devastating the evil deeds he could commit should he give into temptation.

“When such a person can no longer be defeated with force, poison is the final recourse. Even if a person doesn’t eat or drink, they must still breathe. The final duty of our sect is therefore to use poison as a last resort to retake the sword.” Duan Ling nodded in understanding as Wu Du concluded, “Three of our founder’s four disciples left the sect back then, yet the sect is still here. We are the formal successors of the White Tiger.”

Chapter 59

DUAN LING SENSED that Wu Du had more to say, and there was more he wanted to know. After a moment of hesitation he asked, “How did General Zhao die?”

Wu Du slouched against the bench, gazing listlessly into the sunset outside the window. “His rebellion failed, and the late emperor defeated his army. Changliu-jun dealt the final blow.”

“Then…what about the late emperor?” Duan Ling had asked so many questions just to arrive at this one.

“Everyone says he died in battle,” Wu Du said, shaking his head. “But someone like him would never be defeated like that. He was ambushed by a group of assassins”—a violent pang struck Duan Ling’s chest—“then attacked by the assassin Helan Jie and poisoned with Gold Thread Spritz.”

Another painful throb gripped his heart.

“I told him to stop and wait for me before riding into the city, but there was no time. I rode deep into the Xianbei Mountains, to the Northern Temple where Master Kongming once presided as abbot, to find an antidote. But by the time I could return with it, he was already at death’s door, and when Helan Jie’s men attacked him in the city…”

“Who is Helan Jie?” Duan Ling asked, too quickly. “What kind of poison was it? What’s Gold Thread Spritz?”

“A type of snake venom. Helan Jie also uses poisons, but his methods are vicious. He betrayed his sect in the past, just like Wuluohou Mu.”

Sect loyalty was a serious matter for those of the jianghu, and betraying one’s master and bringing dishonor to one’s sect was a terrible taboo. What type of person, then, was Helan Jie?

Noticing Duan Ling’s look of consternation, Wu Du finished, “Helan Jie escaped in the end.”

“But why did he kill—” Duan Ling’s head was a jumble; he almost blurted *my dad*. Catching himself in the nick of time, he instead choked out, “His Majesty?” Wu Du studied Duan Ling; he certainly had a lot of questions. But then again, such impactful events were always the subject of idle interest.

Wu Du shook his head and fell silent. Duan Ling was instantly anxious, but he couldn’t risk appearing too eager. After a reasonable pause, he nudged Wu Du and asked casually, “Why did you stop?”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“Tell me,” Duan Ling pleaded.

Wu Du suddenly blew up. *“I—don’t—want—to!”*

It was Duan Ling’s turn to fall silent; he hadn’t expected Wu Du would get so angry. The atmosphere in the carriage turned tense. Duan Ling asked no more but sat quietly on his side of the bench. He thought of his father, his eyes stinging.

Seeing him like this, Wu Du was at a loss. He’d yelled at Duan Ling because his own head was a mess remembering what happened. He hadn’t thought Duan Ling would be so hurt.

“All right, all right,” Wu Du said. “I *said* I didn’t want to talk anymore, but you kept asking.”

Duan Ling glanced at Wu Du, his eyes sheened with held-back tears.

Wu Du was frankly astonished. He’d only raised his voice a little; was it necessary to act so pitiful? Why did this boy look like he’d just suffered a great wrong? Duan Ling was far too troublesome—but Wu Du did feel a little guilty. When he looked at Duan Ling’s red-rimmed eyes, his heart softened as if he’d been pawed by a kitten.

“Okay, okay, okay—I’ll talk.” Greatly resigned, Wu Du closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he spoke again, his voice had taken on a bitter edge. “It’s just—everyone keeps asking me how the late emperor died. I’ve told them over and over, but the looks they give me…”

Understanding dawned on Duan Ling. Wu Du had been asked to repeat this story too many times. When he’d returned from the north, he must have been interrogated by Li Yanqiu, then the false crown prince, then

Mu Kuangda, each with their own goals, and each confirming the details with Wu Du over and over so they could… *What?*

Wu Du's thoughtless comment sparked another realization.

"Who else has asked you?" Duan Ling asked, struggling to clear his head.

Wu Du opened his eyes and cast him a strange look. "The prime minister, the Marquis of Huaiyin, Princess Duanping, His Majesty, the crown prince, and Xie You."

"Who's Xie You?" Duan Ling asked.

"The commander of the Black-Plated Army," Wu Du replied. "The personal guard of the emperor of the Central Plains—his loyalty belongs only to the emperor."

"And who is the Marquis of Huaiyin?"

"The prince consort, Princess Duanping's husband."

The topic had shifted, but Duan Ling was still sorting through his thoughts. "Who sent the assassin?"

"I don't know," Wu Du admitted. "After Helan Jie betrayed his sect and made off with the Ender of the Profane, he trained his own group of assassins and kept them beyond the Great Wall. He accepted any assassination assignment—for a price—but he was afraid Master Kongming would seek him out, so he rarely interacted with the Han. Initially I thought Prime Minister Mu was the one who'd hired him, but Changliu-jun is the prime minister's only connection to the jianghu. The prime minister is terrified of being killed and scarcely lets Changliu-jun leave his side, never mind sending him across the border to find an assassin who might not even take the assignment. As for Zhao Kui…" Wu Du trailed off, deep in thought for a moment. "He couldn't find Helan Jie either. So I still don't know who killed the late emperor."

"What if it *was* Prime Minister Mu, somehow?" Duan Ling asked.

"Then we'll have to deal with him, of course," Wu Du said. "But the prime minister has been looking for the Guardian this whole time and has explained his circumstances to me thoroughly, so I don't think it's him. He

might have wanted the late emperor dead, but he wouldn't have chosen that moment."

"Then, among the people who interrogated you about the late emperor's death…one of them must be the mastermind."

Duan Ling's words knocked Wu Du over the head like a hammer.

"Of course," Wu Du muttered, half to himself. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Who would interrogate Wu Du repeatedly about the events leading up to Li Jianhong's death? Someone who wished to confirm whether any information had leaked, and determine whether Wu Du knew who'd hired Helan Jie. This incident's history must be completely erased. Otherwise, should the case be revisited in the future, many more people might be implicated, especially after the crown prince returned to court.

"But who could it be?" Wu Du murmured.

The Marquis of Huaiyin, Princess Duanping, Mu Kuangda, Li Yanqiu, the crown prince, Xie You…

"It's probably not Xie You," Wu Du said after a moment. "If he wanted to kill the late emperor, he could have done it easily, long ago. We can eliminate him."

"What if he was bribed?" Duan Ling asked. "What if a different faction got to him; for example if he and…the fourth prince were working together?"

Even Duan Ling found this possibility terrifying. He hadn't even set foot in the court, yet the series of machinations that led to Lang Junxia's attempt on his life had already threatened his survival. If he was currently occupying the seat of crown prince, he would no doubt be facing much graver challenges than these; death could be upon him at any minute.

"The fourth prince?" Wu Du mused. "I can never tell what he's thinking. The Marquis of Huaiyin is also a possibility. After all…" He shook his head. He couldn't figure it out, but Mu Kuangda still seemed like the least likely person.

"Then…the Guardian is the late emperor's sword, right?" Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du was puzzled by how sharp Duan Ling was, able to infer so much from what little he was given. He couldn't help but give him another searching glance.

"What?" Duan Ling asked absentmindedly, still thinking.

"You're clever," Wu Du said. "But I should remind you there are some things you must never say in front of Prime Minister Mu."

"A-all right." Duan Ling knew he'd said too much, but luckily, he hadn't seemed to rouse any real suspicion.

"If we learn who has the Guardian," Wu Du said, "then we'll know who conspired to kill the late emperor. Of course, it could also be that it wasn't any of them, and Helan Jie was sent by Kublai."

This was another possibility. The puzzle gave Duan Ling a blinding headache; he set it aside for the moment.

Sunset dyed the clouds outside a flaming red. When they arrived at the post house, they disembarked to spend the night.

Duan Ling tossed and turned restlessly on the bed. Wu Du's flute melody floated in from the courtyard, its melancholic notes filling up the room.

Wu Du is an earnest person, Duan Ling thought. Even his laziness and conceit were proof of that, in a way. Perhaps he'd truly never wanted to connive with anyone, remaining as a sharp blade hidden inside its sheath. After listening to his story today, Duan Ling felt more certain than ever that he wasn't mistaken—Wu Du could be trusted.

Xichuan was muggy that night, a sign of a coming storm.

Cai Yan rushed through the corridor, his face twisted in an unnatural expression and his back sticky with sweat. When he entered the emperor's quarters, he bowed to Li Yanqiu, who was taking his medicine. A memorial sat on the table.

"Once the capital has been moved, you must think over every decision carefully," Li Yanqiu said.

"Yes," Cai Yan agreed, though he was unsettled.

Li Yanqiu drank half his medicine before he noticed the strain around Cai Yan's eyes. "Where's Wuluohou Mu?"

"He left," Cai Yan said.

"Are you not sleeping well, my son?"

Cai Yan forced himself to smile, and Li Yanqiu waved him closer. He always called him *son* and treated him as his own. He offered Cai Yan the stewed bird's nest soup from his own table and watched as Cai Yan drank it down. Still, Cai Yan's brows were like a knot that couldn't be untied.

"I told you the day you returned, Wuluohou Mu holds no special regard for anyone," Li Yanqiu said. "I could never rest easy with him as your primary attendant. Why did he leave this time?"

"He said he's going back to his hometown to pay respects to his ancestors," Cai Yan said after a moment of thought.

Li Yanqiu sighed. "Then we shall summon Zheng Yan to the palace. Your fifth aunt suggested as much to me a few days ago."

Cai Yan shook his head. He glanced at the memorial on the table but held his tongue. Noticing his hesitation, Li Yanqiu dismissed the servants.

Once the room had emptied, Cai Yan said, "Jiang Prefectural City is far too close to Huaiyin. I don't feel comfortable with Zheng Yan entering the palace, considering this."

Li Yanqiu nodded. After a long pause, he said, "You will have to interact with Yao Fu sooner or later. Fortunately, you're still young, and I am still here. Yao Fu is wary of the Mu family, and Xie You will be there to protect you. Moving the capital at the end of the year should be safe, and I anticipate no issues within the first few years. If your father were still here…I imagine he would say the capital should've been relocated a long time ago." Li Yanqiu smiled to soften his next sentence: "And why should you be scared of Yao Fu? He was the one who was scared of your father. In this regard, you and your father are not so much alike."

Cai Yan's expression changed subtly. "You're right, Fourth Uncle. The relocation is inevitable."

Li Yanqiu waved a hand as if to dismiss the situation. "Careful deliberation is a good thing, but there's no need to be held back by fear.

Learn what you can as we go. You’ll get it eventually.” \

Chapter 60

THUNDER RUMBLED in the distance. When Wu Du returned to their room, he found Duan Ling lying on the bed, still awake. He glanced over at him as he entered.

“Not tired?” he asked.

Duan Ling shook his head. He’d just sat up to offer Wu Du the bed when Wu Du stopped him. “Sleep there. The floor in here is filthy. I saw the porter mopping earlier; who knows how long they’ve been using that same bucket of water. An old well is probably cleaner.”

Duan Ling laughed. As they were traveling together, they’d crammed into the single main bedroom at the post house. The bed was large enough, at least.

“When we get back, the capital might already have moved,” Wu Du said lightly. “Maybe if we do a good job Mu Kuangda will give us a bigger house.”

Duan Ling’s thoughts were still occupied by their afternoon conversation. “Is Xie You in Jiang Prefectural City?”

Wu Du made an affirmative sound, and Duan Ling lost himself in thought again. He wanted to dig deeper into what Wu Du had said before, but Wu Du was a swordsman at heart; he wasn’t well-versed in the political games of Mu Kuangda and his ilk. Since antiquity, the power of the emperor and the power of the prime minister, as well as the regional and the central government, had checked each other in an endless game of tug-of-war. Even after Great Chen had emerged from this latest war, surviving what seemed to be the most dangerous period, tensions simmered under the surface of recovery. One misstep now could upset everything.

The city of Huaiyin was located northwest of Jiang Prefectural City, a vital link in Great Chen’s northwestern defensive line after the fall of Shangzi. The local gentry were powerful and flourishing, with an influence that rivaled the imperial family itself; Princess Duanping’s marriage had therefore been a way to win over the Marquis of Huaiyin, Yao Fu. Moving

the capital so close to Huaiyin was as good as challenging the marquis's power, and proclaimed the Li clan's determination to use the Central Plains as a staging ground for recovering their territories in the north. Mu Kuangda seemed to be the one pushing from behind the scenes, but in truth, it was Li Yanqiu who'd made the final decision. Duan Ling wondered if the false crown prince had enough courage to follow through.

"What kind of person is the crown prince?" Duan Ling asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

Wu Du rolled over, ignoring him. Duan Ling shook him but had to give up when he still didn't receive an answer. He stared at the ceiling, thinking again. If it was just him and his fourth uncle against the marquis and his power, would he be afraid? The capital's relocation was inevitable, though—and when he thought of it like that, the risk seemed just a little bit exciting.

As they set out the next day, Wu Du noticed that Duan Ling was—once again—bleary-eyed.

"Why do you always look so sleepy?" he asked.

But his exasperation quickly turned to resignation. The boy seemed dead tired every morning—if no one looked after him, he'd probably get lost on the way to the carriage.

Autumn was fast approaching. A light drizzle accompanied them that day, the weather cooling as they traveled north from Xichuan.

When they arrived at the Min River at dusk, it had begun to rain in earnest. Wu Du turned to Duan Ling. "From here on out, you're the young master, and I'm the servant."

"All right," Duan Ling agreed, tying his robe properly at the waist.

Patiently, Wu Du walked him through how he ought to address different people and what to say to maintain his disguise. Duan Ling nodded his head continually, looking humble, though his mind was elsewhere.

Wu Du had begun to realize Duan Ling wasn't exactly ordinary—or, rather, that he wasn't the kind of ordinary Wu Du had previously assumed.

This brat had many thoughts but said few aloud; he considered carefully before he spoke, and though he seemed absent-minded, he was actually incredibly astute, often noticing details Wu Du missed himself.

It'd been raining for several days now, and the mountain routes were treacherous. After leaving Xichuan, the road had collapsed in several areas, forcing their driver to make a detour. By evening, the driver had gotten lost and shouted wordlessly toward Wu Du, who had no choice but to clamber on top of the carriage and survey their surroundings.

"What should we do?" Duan Ling called out the window. He made to step out, but Wu Du motioned for him to remain seated.

"Just…practice being a young master," Wu Du muttered half to himself as he unfolded a map. Darkness had fallen, and there were no visible landmarks, only fields filled with bales of straw. The freezing rain and wind whipped around him.

"The people at the post house told us this was the road," Duan Ling said. "We confirmed it."

"We may have taken a wrong turn two crossroads ago." Wu Du was vexed. The driver was deaf and mute; even if Wu Du yelled at him, he wouldn't hear it. He used hand gestures to signal to the driver that he'd been fine taking the Xichuan road, but that as soon as they entered Hanzhong, the man had lost his bearings.

"Why don't we retrace our steps?" Duan Ling asked.

"There are too many forks in the road," Wu Du replied. "Who knows if we'll wander into some other, wilder place in the dark. Let's camp here for the night."

The driver moved the carriage to the side of the road and built a temporary shelter behind it while Duan Ling and Wu Du remained within.

"I'll go see what's around here," Wu Du offered.

"I'll come with you," Duan Ling said, retrieving the dagger Mu Kuangda had given him for self-defense.

Wu Du studied him, mildly surprised. "Why are you so brave all of a sudden?"

Duan Ling remained quiet under Wu Du's baffled stare. The truth was, as soon as Duan Ling had left Xichuan, his life was no longer under direct threat. Other than Lang Junxia, nobody was going to try and kill him for no good reason. The thought had instantly made him feel bolder. He'd slacked off on his martial arts training for the better part of a year, but he still practiced sometimes and could use his skills if needed.

"I just…want to take a walk," Duan Ling replied evasively.

"Wait here."

Yet almost as soon as Wu Du turned to leave, another worrisome thought seemed to occur to him. He turned back and handed Duan Ling a pill. "Swallow it."

"What is it?"

The pill was horribly bitter on his tongue, but upon seeing Wu Du's irritated look, Duan Ling swallowed without further questions. His stomach felt cool for a moment, then warm; a breath later, Wu Du handed him a familiar golden bead.

Duan Ling started.

He remembered this strange golden bead: It was actually a centipede. Duan Ling didn't dare touch it, and was even afraid to look at Wu Du, who barked, "Take it!"

He tossed the bead toward Duan Ling, who had no choice but to brace himself and catch it. If he was bitten, at least Wu Du would hopefully give him the antidote. But the bead didn't unfurl—instead it remained quietly inert.

"Keep that in your robes." Wu Du gestured at him. "I'll go find some water for you. Be right back."

Wu Du disappeared into the night. At first Duan Ling didn't dare touch the bead, much less put it in his clothes. He set it on the bench beside him and observed it for some time before remembering the first pill Wu Du had given him. It must've contained realgar or some other insect-repelling ingredient that would prevent the golden centipede from biting him. What was Wu Du's intention in giving him this? Though frightened, Duan Ling did as he was told and tucked the golden bead away in his robes.

Outside, the driver prodded at his pipe and squatted under a tree to smoke. Duan Ling broke apart a flatbread and stepped out of the carriage to give the man half. Before climbing back in, he gestured at him in an attempt to thank him for his service, but as they couldn't fully communicate, who knew how the man interpreted his wild waving.

A long whistle sounded in the distance. Duan Ling jumped and flicked open the carriage curtains. The rain had stopped, and their surroundings were silent. In the pitch black of the night, only the driver's pipe glowed, visible with a faint red light. Duan Ling exited the carriage again and peered down the road.

The dark clouds shifted, and the puddles on the road reflected the stars overhead. Duan Ling saw movement in the nearest tree. When he got closer, a pair of glowing eyes glared out at him. He was shocked into a scream, the sound echoing far and wide in the quiet wilderness.

"What's wrong?!" Wu Du hollered, scared by the sound and taking a great leap back onto the official road.

"Th-there was a bird," Duan Ling said, pointing at the tree.

It had only been an owl. Wu Du's brows twitched. He whirled back around and headed to a pond a few steps from the road to draw water. Duan Ling followed at his heels. As the storm clouds dissipated, a fresh breeze blew by. Duan Ling relaxed, his mood lifting considerably.

"Someone's camped here before," Duan Ling said. "Look over there. Should we check it out?"

"Why are you so eager to approach strangers?" Wu Du responded. "Not everyone is a kind soul."

Wu Du stripped off his robes and washed his upper body in the water he'd drawn from the pond. After cleaning himself, he grabbed his cloth sack and trudged back to the carriage wearing just his trousers, Duan Ling keeping pace beside him.

"Are you hungry?" Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling was still clutching his flatbread, so he held the rest up to Wu Du's lips. As he ate from Duan Ling's hand, he said around a mouthful, "I'll take you to eat something better at Tong Pass…"

A horse whinnied in the distance, startling Duan Ling and Wu Du. Something was happening.

“Crap!” cried Wu Du.

They heard the wordless yelling of the driver as, with a rumble, the carriage started moving. Suddenly, the shouting came to a halt. Duan Ling’s instincts, honed by countless near-death experiences, instantly kicked in.

“Run!” he shouted, dragging Wu Du with him to hide among the shoulder-high grasses of the roadside.

“Everything’s still in the carriage!” Wu Du hissed, though he allowed himself to be pulled along without further protest as they snuck through the tall grass.

In the next moment, sharp arrows whistled toward their hiding place. Duan Ling twisted to dodge one that flew too close, and he and Wu Du fled toward the pond.

A man on horseback galloped toward them through the open fields piled with bales of straw. Caught off guard, Duan Ling groped for his dagger—the only weapon he had—and tried to shove it into Wu Du’s hand. Wu Du didn’t spare it a glance as he pushed Duan Ling behind a bale. He covered his own mouth and nose with a wet cloth and scattered fluorescent powder in the air; it flickered like fireflies and dusted itself over the nearby grasses.

More horses poured into the field from all directions, their riders shouting in a foreign tongue. It seemed they’d run into a group of Tanguts—their route had brought them close to Western Liang; after their wrong turn, perhaps they’d ended up right on the border. Mounted bandits were common among the Tanguts, and now they’d become a target.

Hollering, the bandits formed a loose semicircle around the area and drew their bows, arrows pointed toward Wu Du at the center of the field.

Wu Du slowly raised both hands above his head, showing that he was unarmed. To Duan Ling he whispered, “Don’t come out. Hold your breath.”

Duan Ling, hiding behind the straw bale, had no concerns about Wu Du’s abilities, but he desperately wanted to see how Wu Du would make his attack.

The bandits had begun to approach when Wu Du suddenly bent forward. The bandits' reaction was immediate—but as they sucked in breath to fire their arrows, they cried out in agony, clutching their chests in what appeared to be excruciating pain. Several arrows left their bows lopsided, weak and missing their mark. One of the men shouted a panicked warning, presumably realizing they'd been poisoned, and the scene descended into chaos. Wu Du backflipped onto the straw bale and plucked free the longest piece of straw.

"Don't come out!" Wu Du called again, afraid Duan Ling would get himself into trouble again, before storming into the bandits like a gale.

The straw flashed between his fingers. With a light flick, blood sprayed from the bandits' necks. Only then did the men understand how fearsome an opponent they had encountered; they wheeled their horses around, howling in terror. Wu Du held nothing more than a half-foot-long piece of straw, but it struck sharp as a knife. The screaming bandits fled with their hands covering their necks.

Wu Du tossed the straw aside. Duan Ling, his mouth hanging slightly open, immediately noticed something peculiar: The bandits' weapons were scattered all over the ground, and the horses had run away. The grass was spattered with blood, but…not a single body lay on the ground.

"They all got away?" asked Duan Ling. "But…didn't you cut their throats?"

"I only scratched them; just deep enough for a good scare. Who would dare keep fighting with blood spurting from their neck? Obviously they'd run."

Duan Ling was speechless.

They both gazed into the distance. Abruptly, realization hit Wu Du. "Shit! Everything's still in the carriage!"

Snapping back to reality, Wu Du rushed toward the official road to chase down the fleeing bandits.

Chapter 61

THEY SPRINTED PAST THE TREE their carriage had been parked under, and Duan Ling stopped to check the driver's pulse. Fortunately, the man was still alive—just unconscious. Duan Ling hauled him upright and propped him against the tree while Wu Du went on ahead.

"W—wait!" Duan Ling panted, quickly losing his breath as he chased after Wu Du.

Wu Du leapt into the high branches of a tree in a few easy strides, while Duan Ling darted to the side, kicking himself off one tree trunk and onto another. From atop the canopy, Wu Du cast his gaze out across the vast plains, searching for the bandits—but even in such a short time, they'd disappeared.

Wu Du cursed. "They stole everything."

Following his line of sight, Duan Ling gazed out too. Wu Du glanced over and had another sudden realization. "How did you get up here?"

Duan Ling almost fell from his branch; Wu Du hurriedly caught him.

Flustered, Duan Ling said, "The map and letter are both on the carriage."

This spelled serious trouble. Duan Ling backtracked to the field and picked up a bow and quiver a bandit had dropped, testing it out. The Tangut bow was crudely made and rough on his hands, but usable.

"You can shoot too?!" Wu Du exclaimed, incredulous.

"Just a little," Duan Ling said, another white lie delivered straight to Wu Du's puzzled face. *If you knew who taught me to scale walls, you'd probably die of shock.*

"Seriously, how did you get up in that tree earlier?" Wu Du wasn't giving up.

"I climbed it! Do we have to talk about this now? We need to find the carriage!"

Firelight flashed in the distance. Wu Du glanced up and saw several owls gliding northwest.

“That way.” After a moment’s consideration, he said, “Why don’t I drop you off…”

But where could he leave him? Wu Du couldn’t abandon Duan Ling alone in the wilderness, and there was still the matter of the unconscious driver. Just as he was feeling completely stymied, a voice shouted in the distance:

“Help—! Save me!”

They looked at each other with mutual frowns. There were more people in such a remote area? Deciding it was unlikely to be a trap, Wu Du crossed the field and found a middle-aged man shouting his lungs out. “Somebody! Help!”

Duan Ling nocked an arrow and aimed it at the man, but the stranger merely fell to his knees in front of them, panting. “Mercy, mercy!”

The man was sweating buckets and looked about to faint. Wu Du studied him briefly before setting a twig alight with a firestarter to properly illuminate his face.

“My young mistress…was kidnapped by those mounted bandits! Who are you? Won’t you please save my lady—”

Duan Ling immediately understood: The bandits had stolen the wrong carriage.

“Who is your young mistress?” Wu Du asked, furrowing his brow as he looked the man up and down.

“Sh-she…” the man stammered, clearly feeling the danger in Wu Du’s regard. “Well…my lady is here to visit relatives.”

“Take care of him.” Duan Ling pointed the man toward the driver resting under the tree. “We’ll go and look for her.”

“You two are…”

Duan Ling waved the question off and turned to leave.

“Hey! Wait!” Wu Du called after him.

“I get it now. We weren’t the bandits’ target,” Duan Ling said without breaking stride.

As soon as he said it, Wu Du understood as well. “Right—it’s too much of a coincidence.”

The bandits had to have been lurking here for some time; this ambush was premeditated. All that yelling in Tangut must have been because they realized something was amiss, and that the person they were looking for wasn’t there. They’d suspected some trick was underway, so they’d moved in. But then—why had they taken the carriage anyway?

This was a true damsel in distress situation. Wu Du and Duan Ling sped down the road, following the ruts made by the carriage wheels until the tracks veered off into the wheat fields. By now, the sky was growing lighter. Duan Ling couldn’t keep up with Wu Du, so he stopped trying, jogging along behind him with occasional short breaks.

Finally, Wu Du couldn’t stand it anymore. “Just go back!”

“I don’t know the way!” Duan Ling panted at him.

Wu Du was speechless.

But Duan Ling was determined to stick with him. Around them were nothing but fields and mountains. They’d set off when it was still dark, and now that dawn was breaking, the landscape looked completely different. They’d been running a full two hours—run all the way back? He was out of his mind!

Thus Wu Du could only slow his pace and observe their surroundings. The wheel tracks had disappeared from under their feet, and across the field was the rocky bank of a stream. Heavy fog covered the plains at daybreak, so thick they could scarcely see their hands in front of them.

“So the bandits wanted to kidnap a lady,” Duan Ling said, walking to the stream and leaning on a boulder to rest. “But they mistook our carriage for their target and tried to kidnap the wrong person.”

Wu Du was still shirtless. His clothes had been stowed in the carriage, so all he had was the towel in his hand, his trousers, and the sash around his waist. He stood and looked into the distance, toward the sound

of rushing water. Before Duan Ling could say more, Wu Du dropped to the ground and pressed his ear to the earth, shushing him. He got up and waded gingerly across the stream, then turned and waved Duan Ling over.

Their carriage was stopped in a clearing before a waterfall. Several bandits were guarding it, groaning as they applied medicine to each other's necks. As Duan Ling watched in the morning light, a few disappeared into a cave behind the waterfall—a makeshift encampment. A lamp hung from the cave's ceiling, and several people were sitting around inside.

"Can we take them out all at once?" Duan Ling asked.

"The ones outside, yes, but not the ones in the cave. We'd need to attack twice, but I have nothing useful with me—only this sash, and I'm low on poison powder. There's just enough left for a single use, so we'd have to kill the rest."

"Then we'll lure the ones inside out," Duan Ling said.

He drew a simple map in the dirt behind the tree, crafting a plan with Wu Du. "And then…once you have everything, I'll leave the rest to you," Duan Ling said, looking to Wu Du for confirmation.

Wu Du nodded his agreement, staring thoughtfully at Duan Ling.

"What?"

"Very bold," Wu Du said. "Who taught you this stuff?"

As Duan Ling scrambled for an appropriate answer, Wu Du said, "Let's get on with it, then."

The pair separated. Duan Ling took a steadying breath, drew his pilfered bow, and shot a single test arrow. His archery skills weren't great, but he'd practiced drawing a bow. Though these Tangut iron bows were exhausting to draw, they were powerful and had a long range.

In the meantime, Wu Du hid himself in the forest and waited, sitting on his haunches with hands braced on his knees as he watched Duan Ling.

The fired arrow whistled softly as it arced across the fifty feet between them and the camp and sailed into the dimly lit cave, where it sliced through the lamp's hanging rope. Before the bandits could react, the lamp fell to the ground and shattered, its flames igniting the grease within. A blazing fire roared to life, and startled cries filled the cave. The guards

outside rushed in to investigate, running directly into those trying to escape. As the bandits shoved past their fellows, Duan Ling loosed his second arrow.

The group's leader was swift enough to dodge a fatal shot, but the arrow still pierced his leg. Realizing they were under attack, the leader roared and cast about for their invisible enemy.

Wu Du was already in position in the forest upwind of the camp. With one graceful flick of his firestarter, a handful of dry leaves covered in poisonous powder were set aflame. Thin blue smoke wafted from them and drifted toward the waterfall.

The first bandit who ran into the smoke collapsed in a soundless heap. Duan Ling shot more arrows as he retreated; the bandits were trying to charge toward him from the cave, but every one of them buckled the instant they breathed the poisoned air. In the ensuing chaos, Wu Du darted over to the front of the carriage and jumped onto it.

Duan Ling had underestimated the number of bandits—he hadn't expected almost forty men would swarm out of such a tiny cave. Yet just as they neared his hiding spot, Wu Du whistled for their attention. Having retrieved his Flashblade from the carriage, he leapt out, still shirtless, with the case strapped over his back.

Wu Du waved to Duan Ling to signal he'd retrieved the items and scattered darts through the sky, pinning the bandits to the ground.

Slinging his bow over his shoulder, Duan Ling crawled through the underbrush toward the cave, while Wu Du mounted the carriage again and whistled a lilting taunt. The enraged bandits, grasping for their bows, got off a few shots, but Wu Du ducked behind the carriage and aimed a flying kick at the carriage shaft, sending a wooden pole that weighed over twenty pounds hurtling toward the bandits.

Duan Ling covered his nose and mouth with a damp cloth before dashing into the surprisingly spacious cave. Violent coughing echoed from its depths—the kidnapped girl. Black smoke clouded Duan Ling's vision; he could hardly see her, but he grabbed her hand, cut through the rope binding her with his dagger, and helped her stand.

“Let’s go!” Duan Ling shouted, covering her face with the cloth and leading her back toward the entrance.

They exited the cave to find that Wu Du had slashed his way through the bandits and swiftly knocked them all unconscious. Duan Ling grabbed the horse, lifting the girl onto its back before jumping up in front of her.

“You two leave first!” Wu Du barked.

Duan Ling set his heels to the horse’s sides, leaping over the stream and galloping into the forest.

“Who *are* you?” the girl asked.

Duan Ling turned his head and asked, “Who are *you*?!”

When they’d traveled far enough to enter the deeper woods, Duan Ling reined the horse to a halt and looked behind them. He hesitated, wondering if he should return to collect Wu Du—but since Wu Du had told them to go ahead, he was likely fine.

“Who are you?” the girl asked again. “What family are you from? Are you Han or Tangut?”

Only then did Duan Ling really take a look at the girl. Their faces were both blackened with soot, so that they looked like calico cats. Duan Ling burst out laughing at the sight, and the baffled girl received no response to her volley of questions.

“Let me think which way we should go,” Duan Ling said. “We have to reconvene with the others first.”

A rustle went through the brush a short distance away, as if someone was approaching. Duan Ling murmured, “Wu Du?”

“Wu Du?” the girl echoed.

“Shh.”

Tensing, Duan Ling reached into his quiver and set his last arrow to the bowstring, aiming into the depths of the forest. A shrill scream broke the silence, startling them both.

The footsteps faded.

Duan Ling lowered his bow, realizing this must be the real entrance to the bandits’ encampment; he and Wu Du had accidentally approached

from behind. The watchman stationed here must have been the source of the rustling—but who had taken care of *him*? Duan Ling wheeled the horse around and galloped into the deepest, densest part of the forest, fleeing until they reached the wheat fields. It was full daylight now, and amid the endless fields where the sky and earth met waited the official road.

"Stay here," Duan Ling said, sliding off the horse. They'd arrived where he and Wu Du had agreed to meet, under the tree where the carriage had originally been stolen. He held the horse while the girl dismounted.

"Don't run off," Duan Ling reiterated as he looked around, taking a few calming breaths. "Are you thirsty?"

A palm streaked toward him from behind. Nerves singing with danger, Duan Ling instinctively blocked the blow, but the opponent's wrist felt like metal—no, it *was* metal! Duan Ling felt the bones in his hand crunch and cried out in shocked pain.

The assassin had come out of nowhere and attacked without warning. His assailant kicked out viciously, and Duan Ling dodged and kicked back in return. The assassin struck out again; this time, Duan Ling was swept to the ground.

"Leave him alone!" the girl shouted.

She pounced on the assassin as if to drag him away, but the man merely grabbed her collar and tossed her aside. He stepped forward and stared Duan Ling down as Duan Ling staggered back.

Who is this? Duan Ling met the assassin's eyes behind his mask, one of which was clouded over—likely blinded. His good eye fixed on Duan Ling, and terror washed over him. This was a true assassin: a living weapon with no humanity.

So fast he was a blur, Wu Du emerged from the wheat field behind them. A whirlwind of chaff swirled around his sword as he lunged, slashing at the throat of the masked assassin, who blocked his Flashblade with one arm. Duan Ling was taken aback; his mind's eye filled with the image of that arm being cleaved off—but when the sword tore through the assassin's sleeve, a hook of black iron emerged where flesh should have been and snaked around Wu Du's sword.

"You?!" Wu Du exclaimed, astonished.

He tossed his sword into the air and struck out with his palm, scattering a burst of poison powder. Duan Ling cheered internally despite the seriousness of the moment—Wu Du's maneuver was practically unbeatable. To meet the strike and repel it, the assassin would need to breathe in and channel his qi, but Wu Du's own blow carried poison; inhaling meant certain death. The second this thought flashed through Duan Ling's mind, the masked assassin leapt backward. Wu Du didn't hesitate: He followed up with a second palm strike, sending the assassin flying into the wheat field before catching his falling sword.

Chapter 62

THE ASSASSIN had a nasty crash landing in the field, but quickly regained his feet.

"Halt—!" a voice shouted.

A group of soldiers had arrived.

Duan Ling yelled too: "Stop fighting! Get back here!"

Wu Du stopped and watched the assassin warily, but the assassin made no move to flee. As soldiers filled the road, the middle-aged man from before emerged from the crowd crying, "M'lady! M'lady!"

The girl Duan Ling rescued had finally recovered from her shock. She let out an answering shout, running toward the man.

Two hours later, Wu Du and Duan Ling found themselves riding together on the back of a borrowed horse. Their carriage was gone, and their possessions lost. Wu Du, bare torso streaked with soot and sword case slung across his back, looked for all the world like a blacksmith. Duan Ling rode in front of him, his face smudged with smoke and ash. The soldiers who led the way seemed in no great hurry.

"Who was he?" Duan Ling murmured.

Wu Du leaned in and whispered, "That was Helan Jie."

The name hit Duan Ling like a bolt of lightning.

Wu Du carried on, unaware, "The one who poisoned the late emperor. Don't go anywhere near him."

"Why did he want to kill me?" Duan Ling asked in disbelief. He began worrying right away—he couldn't fall at the hands of his enemies now and let his efforts be in vain.

"No reason," Wu Du whispered. "He'll kill anyone who annoys him."

Helan Jie, riding at the front of the column, turned and cast them a cold glance. Duan Ling felt a shiver go up his spine.

“Why is he even here?” he asked.

Riding double meant they were pressed body-to-body; when Duan Ling tried to turn his head back to speak to Wu Du, their lips were kissing-close. “…Aren’t you supposed to be smart?” Wu Du whispered, glancing around at the soldiers riding with them. “Take a guess.”

But Duan Ling was too agitated. His father’s murderer was within arm’s reach, but he couldn’t do a thing about it—he couldn’t even tell Wu Du without revealing his identity. Overwrought, he was unable to gather his scattered thoughts.

“What’s wrong?” Wu Du asked, noticing something was off.

Duan Ling shook his head, trying to clear his muddled thoughts so he could sort through the web of complicated relationships.

“I think I got it,” he mumbled. “He’s working for Bian Lingbai, and Bian Lingbai sent him to come find that girl.”

“Exactly,” Wu Du answered. His voice held a chilly undertone. “The girl they took hostage was traveling to Tong Pass as well, presumably to meet Bian Lingbai, but was ambushed by bandits on the way. Bian Lingbai sent Helan Jie to investigate. As for who she is, *that* I don’t know.”

Duan Ling nodded. The bandits had stolen their carriage because they’d mistaken them for the girl and her attendants.

As they came to a crossroads, Duan Ling spotted the other carriage and quickly saw what had happened: Hers was almost indistinguishable from their own. The confused bandits had attacked the wrong person and were unable to report back for further orders, so they took Duan Ling and Wu Du’s carriage back with them. On the way, they’d run into the actual carriage they were looking for and kidnapped the girl. Only the middle-aged man, who seemed to be a steward, had escaped and gone for help.

Sure enough, Duan Ling’s guess was spot-on. A captain of the Tong Pass Garrison was waiting for them at the post house ahead. Duan Ling and Wu Du had taken a wrong turn after the previous post house and ended up heading toward the border between Western Liang and Chen. Western

Liang had been right on the other side of the stream they'd encountered. As it turned out, after they'd gone to rescue the kidnapped girl, her steward had run to the nearest post house with the driver in tow in search of more help. An escort from the garrison at Tong Pass had been waiting for the young lady's arrival, and the two parties crossed paths at the post house. Reinforcements were speedily sent back down the road.

Luckily, their driver hadn't been seriously injured and was resting in the post house's backyard woodshed. Duan Ling checked his pulse again to confirm his life was not in imminent danger.

It seemed the bandits had been wreaking havoc in the area for a long time, and harassed the locals year-round. The soldiers from Tong Pass had repeatedly tried to eradicate them, yet their visitors had still been kidnapped. They expressed their sympathy to each and every one of the victims.

"Please rest assured, miss," a Tong Pass soldier comforted the rescued young woman. "You're safe now."

The girl was still grieving the death of her maid and the other servants that had accompanied her; though the soldiers had offered her food, she had no appetite. She merely nodded toward the soldier as the man's captain approached Wu Du and Duan Ling.

"You two," he barked. "What were you doing there?"

"Just passing through," Wu Du said. "And I suggest you back off."

At his threatening tone, everyone drew their swords. Duan Ling, who'd been lying down dozing on the floor behind Wu Du, was so frightened by the sound of swords sliding free he bolted upright. Wu Du, sitting cross-legged in front of him, reached a hand over his shoulder without looking and pressed him gently back down.

"I defeated your Lord Helan," Wu Du said. "And there're so few of you. How many moves do you think it'd take for me to knock you all out cold?"

A soldier nudged the captain and whispered something in his ear. Duan Ling lay back down behind Wu Du, who was leisurely sipping his tea. He tossed out a calling card. "Take this to General Bian and tell him to be ready for us."

The captain gave Wu Du a long look before picking up the card and leading his men out.

Three groups now occupied this post house. The Tong Pass soldiers and the assassin Helan Jie formed the first group, sitting together on one side of the hall. Helan Jie, with a glove on his left hand and an iron hook for his right, kept his good eye trained on Wu Du. The kidnapped young lady sat on the other side, still softly crying as her steward comforted her. Wu Du and Duan Ling made up the third group. Duan Ling hadn't slept a wink the previous night and was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open. He napped briefly until Wu Du woke him to eat.

"What about you?" Duan Ling asked.

"I already ate."

Duan Ling sat up to have his dinner, and beside him, Wu Du scrubbed the mud off Duan Ling's boots like a patient elder brother.

By this time, the girl had finally calmed down and begun staring at them from across the room. Her steward came over to extend their gratitude and invite Duan Ling for conversation.

"My young master isn't in the mood right now," Wu Du said. "We'll talk at Tong Pass."

The steward went back and relayed their reply. Duan Ling ate more slowly than usual, consumed by the knowledge that his father's murderer was seated right across from him. His blood coursed with fiery hatred. As he chewed his pastry, all he could think about was how if it wasn't for Helan Jie, none of this would be happening. Memories of his father and everything he'd endured since losing him surfaced, one after another, each overlapping the next, piling ever higher and feeding his engulfing rage.

Wu Du! Kill him! Duan Ling wanted nothing more than to scream these words.

But of course he could say no such thing. That was true now, and would remain true even if he recovered his position as crown prince. Wu Du wasn't merely a killing tool to be ordered around.

"What's wrong *now*?" Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling jolted out of his bleak thoughts. It was strange how, whenever he was in low spirits, Wu Du always seemed to sense it.

“I…didn’t rest well. I could feel him staring at us the whole time.”

“Him? He’s as good as useless,” Wu Du said dismissively. “Four of his fingers were severed by the late emperor outside Shangjing, and somehow, he lost his right hand too. He’ll never be able to wield a sword again.”

Maybe if he attached a sword to his amputated arm, Duan Ling thought, he might still be able to use one—but he wouldn’t be able to flick his wrist, turn, thrust, rotate, or sweep as he fought. His skills would be severely set back; he would never vie for supremacy among the elite. Aloud he said, “He definitely still wants to kill me.”

“Your Master Wu wants to kill him, too,” Wu Du replied evenly. “But you have nothing to fear from him.”

Night fell, and Wu Du called for the post house guards to put a screen up for the two of them to lie behind. Duan Ling recalled Master Kongming’s tale in the Northern Temple and concluded the disciple who’d betrayed his sect and stolen the Ender of the Profane must be none other than Helan Jie. The memory of that conversation was so distant it might as well have been from a previous life—it didn’t feel real. Lang Junxia had also betrayed his sect, Duan Ling knew. But for some reason, while he hated Helan Jie with every fiber of his being and would have gladly chopped him to pieces, his feelings toward Lang Junxia were far milder: simple hurt from his betrayal.

“What are you gonna do about him?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du rolled onto his side and whispered into Duan Ling’s ear, “We can’t kill him now. We need to find out what his connection is with Bian Lingbai.”

“He’s working for him,” Duan Ling whispered back. “Without a doubt.”

“Yes,” Wu Du agreed.

Duan Ling gave him a curious look. This was the first time he’d heard Wu Du seriously suggest killing anyone. “You don’t want to spare his

life?”

“What?” Wu Du replied, confused. “Why would I spare him? Of course I’ll kill him after we finish our job here. What kind of question is that?”

Duan Ling was moved almost to tears hearing this; he could have wrapped his arms around Wu Du and kissed him on the spot. Wu Du surely thought he was just acting strange again. But there was something else Duan Ling understood now: When Wu Du truly wished to kill someone, he wouldn’t hesitate; to him, Helan Jie was as good as dead. The only thing holding him back was that they couldn’t afford to alert Bian Lingbai.

More soldiers arrived at the post house the following morning. Duan Ling had yet to open his eyes when he heard the clatter of hoofbeats outside. He counted silently: Five…ten…fifteen…twenty… Nearly a hundred soldiers. The Tong Pass Garrison was obviously well trained and well organized.

An officer entered first and escorted the young lady out. Soon after, Helan Jie left as well; in but a few moments, the post house had emptied out. Wu Du leaned over him. “If you’re awake, get up.”

Duan Ling sat up and looked around to find that they were the only two left in the hall.

“They’re all gone?” Duan Ling asked.

“Outside,” Wu Du corrected. “Now sit behind the screen and don’t come out.”

A voice called from outside: “I didn’t think you would be so brave as to come to Tong Pass.”

Wu Du sneered as he called back, “Bian Lingbai, I told you to clean your neck and wait for my sword. Did you?”

A general in his thirties walked in and stood just inside the doorway like a soldier at ease. Wu Du lounged on the divan set in front of the screen. More Tong Pass soldiers filed in after Bian Lingbai. They trained raised crossbows on Wu Du, who yawned and cast an impatient look at Bian Lingbai.

“Come on. If I really wanted to kill you, I’d have waited at the door and stabbed you as you stepped inside. Am I supposed to sit here patiently while you assemble your army? You didn’t even check behind the door before entering—you’re as stupid as your dog. Squatting here at Tong Pass for so long has dulled your brain.”

“You—!” Bian Lingbai started angrily. Duan Ling, listening from behind the screen, snickered into his hand. Seeming to recover himself, Bian Lingbai sneered. “Why are you here?”

“I brought someone to see you.” Wu Du pushed himself lazily up from the divan. “But seeing as you’re pointing arrows at us, we’ll leave.”

“Wait,” Bian Lingbai said, gesturing for his soldiers to lower their crossbows.

“Bian Lingbai,” Wu Du continued, chilly. “I don’t expect you to thank me for saving a hostage for you—but are you really operating under the impression that no one in the world can touch you?”

Bian Lingbai’s expression was stormy, but he didn’t dare contradict Wu Du. After all, Wu Du had been Zhao Kui’s right-hand man, privy to a great deal of top-secret military intelligence regarding the border. The general curled his lip. “Then come meet me at Tong Pass if you dare.”

With this, Bian Lingbai turned on his heel and left. When he was safely out of sight, Wu Du took Duan Ling outside to inspect the carriage, then ordered one of the soldiers to drive as he and Duan Ling sat inside, following the general to the pass.

Chapter 63

TONG PASS WAS a major border stronghold nestled into the mountainside, with the Yellow River flowing to its north. After a thousand years of continuous development, the city surrounding the fortress had become the largest in the northwest and provided a natural barrier against Western Liang. From the high ground of the last stretch of road before entering the pass, they saw the surging waters of the Yellow River under a blue sky scattered with white clouds. To the south, entering the gorge, the landscape was green and lush—but to the north, toward Western Liang, it was barren.

Rainfall had saturated the air with the scents of autumn. Merchants from the Western Regions gathered at the pass, exchanging their goods and chattering in their own tongues. There were plenty of Tanguts, most of whom were of mixed ethnicities, with their deep-set eyes and high-bridged noses; they wore either long, colorful robes, lightweight leather outerwear, or skirts. A few wore a turban with a black goose feather—the feather's rarity marked the wearer as nobility within the tribe.

When Wu Du brought Duan Ling into the governor's residence at Tong Pass, Bian Lingbai greeted him as he would a powerful enemy. Security was everywhere, the complex heavily fortified with armed guards. The moment they entered the main hall the guard closed the door at their backs, leaving them alone with Bian Lingbai. The general sat drinking wine, with Helan Jie sitting silently by his side.

"Speak," Bian Lingbai said from the seat of honor. "What you say will determine whether you step out of this room alive."

Wu Du stared him down, shafts of dim sunlight falling over his shoulders. "Bian Lingbai. Have you been a local tyrant so long that you've forgotten your worth? You think you could take my life with these few men here?"

Helan Jie shot angrily to his feet. Bian Lingbai barked, "Sit down!"

Both sides lapsed into silence. Wu Du paced the length of the hall for a moment before saying, “General Zhao dedicated himself to our Great Chen, only to meet such an end. In the final battle outside Xichuan, you were stuck here defending Tong Pass. This was not your fault, and the court did not blame you. But you’re a smart man—I don’t need to explain what’s at stake here.”

Bian Lingbai remained silent, as did Duan Ling. This was the plan he and Wu Du had discussed on the way. Mu Kuangda wanted Bian Lingbai dead. Before they’d left, Duan Ling still held a glimmer of hope that the general could be spared. Yet after mulling the situation over on the journey, he’d come to the same conclusion as Mu Kuangda: Bian Lingbai had no choice but to rebel.

He had not only participated in the original seizure of Li Jianhong’s military power, he had also followed Zhao Kui in rebellion. At present the court had a steady reserve of soldiers but few generals capable of warding off Western Liang, so he had to be kept in place—for the time being. But with the capital moving from Xichuan to Jiang Prefectural City, Western Liang would no longer pose a direct threat to the seat of government. What was more, the rediscovered crown prince would doubtless wish to settle old scores. Only death awaited Bian Lingbai. If he wished to live, he had to take his chances and rebel.

Bian Lingbai snorted coldly. “General Zhao was my teacher. I joined the military at fourteen and followed him honorably for thirteen years. I have never wronged the common people or betrayed my conscience. Even if the crown prince himself stood before me today, I would say the same!”

“The crown prince won’t come to you or listen to your explanations,” Wu Du said. “It seems I’ve wasted my time. I won’t bother you anymore. Goodbye.” To Duan Ling he said, “Let’s go.”

But Duan Ling stared at Bian Lingbai, unmoving. Bian Lingbai stared right back. Wu Du tried to catch Duan Ling’s eye and was ignored.

“Did you know my uncle well?” Duan Ling said at last.

Wu Du allowed a frown to cross his lips, while Bian Lingbai released a long sigh.

They had planned this too. After Wu Du finished saying his part, it would be Duan Ling's turn. Duan Ling had guessed Bian Lingbai wouldn't sit back and ignore Zhao Kui's nephew. In the story they'd spun, Wu Du was Zhao Kui's trusted aide who'd been charged with his orphaned nephew. The letter they carried clearly stated that the young man named Zhao Rong had been spared execution but had his possessions confiscated by the court. With nowhere else to go, he'd turned to Bian Lingbai. Even if only to better his own reputation, Bian Lingbai would feel obligated to look after the boy. And if he genuinely intended to rebel, driving them away would do him no good.

"Your uncle was my shifu. Come here; let me take a good look at you," Bian Lingbai said.

Hesitantly, Duan Ling approached. As Bian Lingbai examined him under the sunlight, nervousness washed over Duan Ling—what if something in his appearance gave him away?

"I met your father once," Bian Lingbai said. "I ran into him when I went to Shandong for business."

Duan Ling knew he should probably cry now, but Bian Lingbai stirred no strong feelings in him. He stared down at his hands instead.

Bian Lingbai studied him for another moment, but nothing about this boy was obviously remarkable. "Did you study the literary or martial arts?"

"A little of both," Duan Ling said.

"Can you read?"

Duan Ling nodded.

"Stay here at the residence for now," Bian Lingbai said. "As for you…"

"Wu Du has to stay with me," Duan Ling said. "I go wherever he goes."

If Bian Lingbai tried to send Wu Du away, it would throw off their plans entirely. Wu Du would have to sneak back to complete his investigations in secret—and with Helan Jie lurking nearby, this would make things much more complicated.

They had to give Bian Lingbai no other choice.

“I came under Mu Kuangda’s orders to investigate the whereabouts of that sword,” Wu Du said.

“Asking me is pointless,” Bian Lingbai said. His attitude toward Wu Du was still frigid. “If you were hoping to hand the Guardian over to your new master, you came to the wrong place.”

“I should have known,” Wu Du countered with equal derision. “With your shoddy skills, you’d never even be able to wield it.”

Every time Bian Lingbai attempted to humiliate Wu Du, he ended up the worse off. Now he looked ready to explode.

“I’ll return after Zhao Rong is settled,” Wu Du said. “Otherwise, the prime minister might get suspicious.”

Bian Lingbai sighed heavily again—this time with some relief—and waved a hand at the servants, sending them off to make accommodations for the pair.

“Zhao Rong, come to dinner later.”

It seemed Bian Lingbai had believed him. Maybe he would allow Duan Ling to become an idle hanger-on, or perhaps foster him for the sake of his teacher, Zhao Kui. In any case, the mission was off to a smooth start. The next steps would be up to Wu Du.

Bian Lingbai appointed them a guest room and servants to attend them, which Wu Du sent away. Their missing belongings and robes were waiting in their courtyard, presumably recovered after the rest of the bandits were apprehended. Duan Ling was rolling up his sleeves to start tidying up when Wu Du stopped him.

“Don’t blow your cover,” he said. “Remember, you’re a young master. You don’t do housework.”

“Zhao Rong was in a desperate situation,” Duan Ling argued. “He escaped death and you’re the one who saved him, so this isn’t merely a master-servant relationship. It’s reasonable for me to do some things for myself.”

After a moment of thought, Wu Du agreed. Together they cleaned up their new accommodations before finally retiring to the bedroom. Duan Ling shut the door behind him as Wu Du flopped down on the bed.

“We’ll be here for a while,” Wu Du said. “Maybe quite a while. I didn’t think he’d accept us so easily—we haven’t even given him the treasure map. Do you think he believes your story?”

“Whether he believes me or not,” Duan Ling said, “he isn’t that smart. I came here seeking refuge—he doesn’t find that suspicious enough on its own to investigate closely. At most, he’ll be guarded when speaking with me. He took in Helan Jie, so what’s one teenage boy?”

“Yeah,” Wu Du murmured as he lay there, deep in thought.

Duan Ling settled down on the bed next to him and closed his eyes.

“What are you going to sleep for?”

“Aren’t you taking a nap too?” Duan Ling asked, confused.

“This is training.”

“Training for what?” Duan Ling was even more baffled. “Your sleep technique?”

Wu Du ignored him, zoning out.

“He didn’t ask about Shandong at all,” Duan Ling mused.

“He didn’t know Zhao Pu well,” Wu Du said. “But still—tread carefully. Don’t let your guard down.”

Duan Ling had filled himself in on Zhao Rong’s past on the road, familiarizing himself with all the requisite people and events in Shandong, yet none of it had been of any use. Being thrown into an unfamiliar environment made him anxious, jittery. The only thing that made him feel safe was Wu Du.

“Hey.” Duan Ling nudged Wu Du again, but he was already asleep.

Looks like he was really training his sleeping skills. Duan Ling tilted his head and gazed openly at Wu Du’s face. His eyebrows were striking, and the defined contours of his face gave him a rugged look—but when he was asleep like this, his roguish aura dissolved, leaving a strange gentleness in its place. He’d spent the prior two nights awake, either saving people and hunting down enemies, or keeping watch on Duan Ling under Helan Jie’s predatory gaze; he hadn’t been able to rest well.

Duan Ling let him sleep and got up to gingerly sort through their belongings. Everything was there, but they had obviously been searched. Bian Lingbai must've had some suspicions, after all.

Why was Helan Jie at Tong Pass?

As Duan Ling headed into the Bian manor for dinner at dusk, he wondered: Did Helan Jie's presence here prove Bian Lingbai was part of the conspiracy to assassinate the late emperor? And if so, who was the mastermind behind Bian Lingbai?

Wu Du had woken just before dinner and was still groggy and irritable, his brow slightly furrowed. They entered the main hall to find that, while Helan Jie thankfully had not made an appearance, another familiar face awaited them—the young lady they had rescued. Now recovered from her trial and finely dressed, she appeared a bit younger than Duan Ling. Bian Lingbai was in the middle of talking to her when they arrived.

Duan Ling greeted them both with a proper guest's bow, and the girl blushed and fell silent.

"This is Miss Yao, of the Yao family in Huaiyin," Bian Lingbai said to Duan Ling. "I believe you met on the way here."

Duan Ling nodded. Bian Lingbai turned to the young lady and gestured toward Duan Ling. "This is my eldest brother's son, Bian Rong."

The girl was Commandery Princess Yao Zheng's younger cousin, Yao Jing. She nodded at Duan Ling in return. Unmarried girls weren't permitted to introduce themselves to strangers. Though Bian Lingbai was a military man who cared little for such etiquette, he handled the introduction properly out of consideration for the Yao family.

Duan Ling had carried too many names in his short life—a life which was beginning to seem like a play. He adopted one role one minute, another the next. Duan Ling, Li Ruo, Wang Shan, Zhao Rong, Bian Rong—personas appeared one after the other, the switching of masks so constant he felt he barely knew himself anymore as he sat dazed in the bright hall.

"Marquis Yao sent her to Tong Pass to be married off to a prominent house of Western Liang," Bian Lingbai explained to Duan Ling. "We weren't expecting the carriage to catch the eyes of bandits on the road. It was fortunate you and Wu Du happened to come to her rescue."

“Thank you both for saving me.” Yao Jing raised her cup with gracious manners.

Duan Ling smiled and turned to Wu Du. “She’s toasting you.”

Still disoriented from his nap, Wu Du grunted a wordless response and carelessly tossed back his cup. Duan Ling waited for him to swallow the wine before following suit.

Chapter 64

AN AWKWARD QUIET settled over the hall. Bian Lingbai glanced over at Duan Ling several times, as if he had something on his mind. Finally, Duan Ling broke the silence. “So, when is the wedding?”

“The seventh month,” Yao Jing answered. “My uncle told me to wait here in Tong Pass for Western Liang to send an escort.”

“You’ve had a difficult journey,” Bian Lingbai said. “Since you don’t have any servants remaining, I’ll provide you some, or you may send your steward along to the market to see if any catch your eye.”

At the stark reminder that her maid and servants had all been killed by the bandits, Yao Jing’s expression dimmed. “Thank you.”

“You may go back to your rooms and rest if you like,” Bian Lingbai said.

Yao Jing took her leave with a nod to her dinner companions. Duan Ling couldn’t entirely repress his surprise as he watched her exit the room. The Marquis of Huaiyin’s niece, from the far-removed Jiangzuo region, was going to marry into a family in Western Liang? Even setting aside the long distance, she’d been traveling with only a few servants, and their meager group had been waylaid by bandits. The traditional bridal escort wasn’t picking her up directly from her home either; she’d been sent on her own to Tong Pass for Bian Lingbai to complete her wedding preparations. What kind of arrangement was this?

The most obvious answer was that Yao Jing wasn’t favored in her family.

Bian Lingbai, noticing the direction of Duan Ling’s attention, took a sip of his wine and asked, “Do you like her?”

Duan Ling smiled. “I wouldn’t have a chance even if I did.”

Bian Lingbai laughed openly; he found this young man quite direct and therefore interesting. “In the past, your uncle considered arranging a marriage with the Yao family, but his children were all still too young to be

wed. He asked me once if he should arrange for Yao Zheng to marry his nephew, and I imagine he meant you—but if he were still alive, I don't think he would care for this girl as a match."

Duan Ling nodded, looking slightly regretful.

"The bridal escort from Western Liang will come soon enough. Once I've seen this matter through, I'll help you settle in," Bian Lingbai finished.

"Uncle Bian…" Duan Ling said, affecting hesitance. "There's something else I brought for you."

"Hm?" Bian Lingbai murmured, his expression nonchalant.

A frown twitched across Wu Du's lips, and he cleared his throat. Duan Ling turned an imploring look on him, but Wu Du furrowed his brow in response, obviously displeased. The disapproval didn't dissipate even after Duan Ling nodded at him, as if to say, *trust me*.

Impatient, Bian Lingbai asked, "Well, what is it? So secretive."

Duan Ling drew a small object from his robes and handed it over. At first, Bian Lingbai was unimpressed—but when Duan Ling untied the silk ribbon and the treasure map slowly unfurled before his eyes, Bian Lingbai lifted a puzzled gaze to Duan Ling's face. "What is this?"

The treasure map you've been looking for, Duan Ling thought, though he didn't dare say as much aloud. He dipped his head toward Bian Lingbai and sat back down.

"Something too good for the likes of you," Wu Du sneered.

Bian Lingbai's confusion visibly increased. He picked up the map to take a closer look, and just like that, his expression changed—a shudder ran through his body, and his eyes jumped back up to Duan Ling in disbelief.

"My uncle sent me a military book, and this map was folded into its pages," Duan Ling said, delivering his invented story to Bian Lingbai just as planned. He delineated how Zhao Kui had always seemed to carry high hopes for him and had wished him to familiarize himself with military texts. He'd hidden this map within the latter sections of Sun Tzu's treatises, so Duan Ling had only discovered it after he'd read enough pages. There were far too many holes in this story—for one, why had Zhao Kui given such a

precious map to his nephew instead of his own son—but when Duan Ling saw Bian Lingbai's eyes light up, he knew it had done the trick.

"Very good… Excellent," Bian Lingbai murmured, a glint in his eyes as he stared, transfixed, at the map.

Suddenly, Duan Ling felt as if he'd seen this look before: It was the same expression Cai Yan had whenever he'd looked at Duan Ling's jade arc. Diverted by this stray thought, he was swiftly brought back to reality by Bian Lingbai's half-crazed laughter.

"Very good! Very good!" Bian Lingbai repeated. "Wait here."

Bian Lingbai tucked the treasure map away in his robes and strode out of the hall without another word. Puzzled, Duan Ling turned to look at Wu Du, who continued eating in silence. Yet even after the night watch announced the late hour, Bian Lingbai still hadn't returned.

Duan Ling assumed he'd gone to verify the map's authenticity, and hoped desperately that everything would go smoothly. Asking Wu Du was impossible—the walls most certainly had ears—so he waited quietly after finishing his meal. Finally, much further into the night, a guard came to collect Duan Ling and guide him to Bian Lingbai's study. Wu Du, the guard explained, was forbidden from following along.

The two exchanged a glance. Wu Du nodded; this would be the true test for Duan Ling.

Bian Lingbai was waiting in his study, sitting with another man at his side. The man seemed old, though he had no beard, and was examining the map carefully with gloved hands. When Duan Ling entered, he gave him a nod.

"This is Mister Fei Hongde," Bian Lingbai told him. "He's your senior by two generations. He worked under both your uncle and the late emperor in the past; he's incredibly knowledgeable."

Duan Ling greeted him politely.

"Where did you get this map?" the man asked him.

Duan Ling repeated a briefer account of the story he'd told Bian Lingbai, and the man nodded slowly. He turned to Bian Lingbai with a

slight smile. “Congratulations, General. Once the treasure is unearthed, it will no doubt fulfill the needs of our army.”

“The heavens have truly smiled upon me,” Bian Lingbai agreed. “Mister Fei, when should we start digging?”

“We’ll need to wait a bit longer.” Fei Hongde rolled the map closed again and handed it back to Bian Lingbai. “Don’t tell anyone else about this. I’ll examine the site myself and report directly to you.”

Bian Lingbai nodded. After another moment of thought, he asked, “Should we send a team to guard it?”

“Disguising a few soldiers as bandits to patrol the foot of the mountain is fine, but nobody’s been there for almost twenty years; there’s no urgency. Right now the only people who know of this are you, me, and Young Master Zhao here, so there’s no chance of it getting out. You needn’t worry, General Bian,” Fei Hongde explained.

“All right,” Bian Lingbai said. “That’s reasonable.”

He broke out in hearty laughter again, then waved Duan Ling over to sit beside him. Patting him firmly on the shoulder, he said, “The heavens sent you to help me! This matter is a done deal.”

Duan Ling nodded, smiling at Bian Lingbai. Fei Hongde turned his gaze toward Duan Ling and said, “Young man, you’ve had a tough journey. I just arrived here myself from Western Liang.”

“It wasn’t too bad,” Duan Ling replied. “Wu Du was with me.”

“I see,” Fei Hongde said. “And when did you arrive in Xichuan?”

“At the start of spring this year,” Duan Ling answered.

“Your father’s former subordinates in the Shandong Garrison joined the Ministry of War after the troops were relieved. It seems you chose to follow Wu Du instead of seeking them out. This was a wise decision,” Fei Hongde said.

“I didn’t dare show myself too openly. After all, people’s hearts are hard to know.”

Fei Hongde nodded. “Remind me, which family did your cousin marry into?”

Duan Ling's heart pounded. Fei Hongde was obviously pretending to reminisce with him while attempting to verify his identity. Thanking the heavens that he'd done his research, he asked, "Which cousin?"

"Ah, I don't remember," Fei Hongde said with a smile. "When I worked for the late emperor in Shandong, I heard there was an exquisitely beautiful girl in your mother's family…"

"Ah, you must mean my fourth sister," Duan Ling replied in a snap. "But she fell ill after she married."

Fei Hongde's understanding nod was slow and measured.

"Mister Fei has traveled extensively," Bian Lingbai told Duan Ling. "Though he's Tangut by birth, he serves as a scribe in my army. Feel free to ask him for advice."

"Thank you very much," Duan Ling said.

Fei Hongde turned once more to Bian Lingbai. "General, we'll need a map of the area north of Tong Pass before we can discuss this in more detail."

Duan Ling sensed they were through with him, so it was unsurprising when Bian Lingbai said a few kind words and dismissed him to go and get a good rest. Bian Lingbai's attitude toward him now was poles apart compared to when Duan Ling had first arrived; he seemed to regard Duan Ling now almost as a younger brother.

Once Duan Ling had left the study, Bian Lingbai turned back to Fei Hongde. "So?"

The man deliberated for a moment before replying. "There's no mistake about his identity. He's certainly Zhao Pu's relative."

Bian Lingbai was reassured by this. "It's still possible he's impersonating someone, though."

"That seems unlikely. You observed him as well—the child must come from a family of scholars, yet he also displays some military manners. He speaks little, but when he does, his words are natural and composed. He is not afraid of you, which means he's confident in himself. He isn't the cowering sort you could find anywhere. Where could Wu Du possibly

locate such a young man for a ruse? Besides, what benefit is there for him in fooling us?”

Bian Lingbai had to agree. What would Wu Du gain from dragging a young man all the way across the country with a treasure map in hand, just to deliver his enemy a trove of money?

“He betrayed General Zhao, and caused Li Jianhong’s death,” Bian Lingbai said, befuddled. “Though he’s under Mu Kuangda’s command right now, his life must be hard going. He’s probably hoping to find a better master.”

“Wu Du is an indecisive man,” Fei Hongde said. “He took refuge with the Mu family, but Changliu-jun certainly won’t let him stand out or receive any rewards. It makes sense that he would seek you out, General.”

“If Helan Jie hadn’t come to me earlier, Wu Du would’ve been ideal for our purposes,” Bian Lingbai mused.

Fei Hongde sighed at the reminder. “Speaking of Helan Jie… I remain against you taking him in. If the court learns he’s here, you’re bound to be implicated in the murder of the late emperor.”

“Never mind that.” Bian Lingbai waved his hand impatiently. “That’s enough.”

Fei Hongde tipped his head, acknowledging the dismissal. “I will survey the site within a few days.”

With that, he took his leave. Alone in his study, Bian Lingbai allowed his face to split into a broad grin. He unfolded the map, studying its details over and over with an avaricious gleam in his eyes.

Wu Du and Duan Ling walked back together through the night-darkened corridors. A bright moon hung over Tong Pass, so large it seemed unreal, its clear brilliance glowing across the land. A light breeze blew past, and Duan Ling froze in place at the end of the corridor, sensing something. Wu Du stopped too, his brows quirking. He glanced at Duan Ling in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

Duan Ling shook his head, unable to put the strange feeling to words.

Wu Du laid a hand on Duan Ling's shoulder, and the two looked out over the courtyard. Under the languid light of the moon, Duan Ling felt he'd truly become Zhao Rong.

"The waters of Diannan, the moon of Tong Pass," Wu Du said. "The pines of Mount Yuheng, the snow of Lan Pass."

Duan Ling's head snapped around. "You know this, too?"

"Know what?" Wu Du replied.

"Those…" Duan Ling recalled what Li Jianhong had told him about the Central Plains. He paused, gathering his thoughts. "My dad used to tell me there are too many beautiful places in this world."

"Those of the jianghu have unfettered souls," Wu Du said with a casual diffidence.

"So this is the moon of Tong Pass," Duan Ling reflected aloud. "And the maple groves beneath Yubi Pass…"

"You'll see those too someday," Wu Du said to him. "Come on."

"Are you saying you'll take me there?" Duan Ling asked.

"You can think of it that way, if you'd like," Wu Du replied carelessly.

They guarded their words inside Bian Lingbai's residence, but Duan Ling knew what he meant: After this mission, Wu Du would take him wherever he wanted.

Chapter 65

WHEN THEY ROUNDED the corner, someone waswaiting for them: Helan Jie. Duan Ling nearly jumpedout of his skin. Wu Du pressed down on his shoulder and stepped in front of him.

“You’re making a move here?” Wu Du asked. “I’m not paying if we destroy your patron’s residence.”

Helan Jie’s scarred face was particularly terrifying under the bright moonlight. “Wu Du,” he said. “Remember this: You, I won’t kill.” He pointed at Duan Ling with the iron hook he had in place of a hand. “Him, I will flay,” Helan Jie said in broken Han. “I will make a lantern from his skin.”

The threat left Duan Ling speechless.

“If you find him missing someday,” Helan Jie said, “come collect his body from me.”

Wu Du put his hand over his sword hilt. A murderous, oppressive aura exuded from him. Duan Ling gripped his arm, holding him back. No matter how they eventually dealt with this man, now wasn’t the time. Both watched as Helan Jie walked off, his message delivered; the mere sight of him drove a shudder down Duan Ling’s spine.

“You need to stay by my side at all times while we’re here,” Wu Du said.

Wasn’t that the plan anyway? Duan Ling thought.

“Why’s he so set on killing me?” Unspoken was the fear that Helan Jie recognized him somehow, since he’d met his father. But it seemed unlikely. Bian Lingbai, Mu Kuangda—even Wu Du himself—had seen Li Jianhong before, but none of them had recognized him. Perhaps their own preconceived notions had prevented them from considering the resemblance, or perhaps he simply didn’t look much like his father.

He would rather believe Helan Jie hadn’t guessed his identity. But then, what possible grudge could the assassin bear against him to warrant his death?

“He just wants revenge,” Wu Du said.

Duan Ling froze. “Revenge for what?”

“Revenge on me, for catching his poisoned needles before,” Wu Du said. “You can’t apply normal logic to someone like that. He’s a mad dog; he slaughtered his own sect.”

“But why wouldn’t he attack you directly? Why would he go after me instead?” Duan Ling asked, perplexed.

Wu Du glanced at Duan Ling but remained silent. Before Duan Ling could ask any more questions, he said, “Forget it, let’s not talk about it right now. Time to train.”

Duan Ling wasn’t sure what he’d missed.

After too many restless nights on the road, they finally had a proper bed again. With Helan Jie’s threat in mind, Wu Du hauled Duan Ling onto the bed and nudged him toward the wall while he slept on the outside for protection. Unlike with Duan Ling’s paranoia regarding Wuluohou Mu from before—the frantic surety that he would be murdered—Wu Du was taking this seriously.

Much later, in the dark of the night, Wu Du wailed in frustration: “Stop clinging! How old are you, that you keep latching onto me like this in your sleep?”

“Huh?” Duan Ling mumbled. He’d been dreaming about a fish carrying him through warm waters when Wu Du’s outburst woke him. Though it was autumn, the weather was still humid, and they were both

sweating from being plastered together. He sat up and asked, half asleep, “Who’s there? What’s going on?”

Wu Du couldn’t believe this kid.

He grabbed a fan and prodded Duan Ling to lie down again, after which Duan Ling slept comfortably all the way through until morning.

Bian Lingbai summoned them for breakfast early the next day. His attitude toward Duan Ling had changed completely; he spent the meal reminiscing about the time he’d spent at Zhao Kui’s residence in the past. Zhao Rong hadn’t been particularly close to Zhao Kui, so all Duan Ling had to do was nod along with whatever Bian Lingbai said.

After breakfast, Fei Hongde joined them. “I was thinking of taking a trip outside Tong Pass today. Young Master Zhao, why don’t you come along?”

Bian Lingbai gave Duan Ling some additional instructions and had horses readied so he and Wu Du could follow Fei Hongde on the excursion.

The sun shone brightly overhead as the group left the city. Duan Ling rode in a carriage with Fei Hongde down the mountain. Wu Du trailed a little distance behind them on horseback, guessing that with Fei Hongde present, that mad-dog assassin wouldn’t dare make a move.

Spotting that Fei Hongde had taken a compass from his sack, Duan Ling surmised the man must be skilled in geomancy and was likely attempting to divine the location of Zhao Kui’s hidden treasure.

“I went to visit Miss Yao this morning,” Fei Hongde told Duan Ling amiably as he adjusted the compass.

Duan Ling nodded. “How is she doing?”

“She is understandably distressed at being married off all the way to Western Liang,” Fei Hongde said. “The groom is the son of Western Liang’s cavalier aide, Shang Leguan.”

“Why is the Yao family sending her to marry so far away?”

“Since the fall of Shangjing, the relationship between Western Liang and the Liao Empire has cooled—a sign that a storm is coming,” Fei

Hongde replied lightly, leaning over to show Duan Ling the compass. “If all goes to plan, after Bian Lingbai dies, Southern Chen and Western Liang will be able to renew their alliance.”

Duan Ling flinched, almost knocking the compass out of Fei Hongde’s hands. Fei Hongde nodded, and a cunning smile crossed his face, as if he was satisfied with Duan Ling’s reaction.

“You’re still too inexperienced,” he said, maintaining his smile as he glanced at Duan Ling.

Duan Ling gave him a wary look. “What do you mean by that, sir?”

An alarming realization struck him. Fei Hongde seemed to know too much, as if he’d seen right through their plans. What should they do—kill him quickly to silence him?

“Keep that knife hidden in your sleeve,” Fei Hongde said, turning away to grab his abacus. “It’s not time to wield it yet. Anyway, if you were to kill me in this carriage, how would you explain my death to Bian Lingbai?”

Duan Ling was struck speechless.

“Chang Pin is my shizhi,”[16] Fei Hongde continued. “I was the one who sent the letter to Xichuan that exposed Bian Lingbai’s plans. But I didn’t expect Prime Minister Mu would send Wu Du with a young man such as yourself.”

A long, relieved sigh escaped Duan Ling; the weighty fear of being executed lifted from his mind. Even so, he didn’t dare let down his guard. “So why did you…”

“For all my life, I have been loyal only to justice and to the realm. After the late emperor’s passing, Bian Lingbai sent a messenger to recruit me. If the northwest border is not properly secured, Xichuan and the Central Plains might be conquered yet again by our foreign foes. Thus I joined General Bian and waited for an opportunity.”

Duan Ling studied Fei Hongde. “You knew the late emperor?”

“At that time, Zhao Kui, Bian Lingbai, and their allies were already planning to rebel,” Fei Hongde said. “I offered the late emperor advice, but

before we could complete our preparations, Zhao Kui launched his attack. Three opposing forces fought for power at the battle of Jiangjun Ridge."

Duan Ling kept his own silent counsel on this matter. Fei Hongde might be trying to trick him.

But a moment later, Fei Hongde said, "Before that, of course, I had advised the late emperor to send Wuluohou Mu to Shangzi to locate the missing princess consort. Many years have passed since then." The man paused again, and when Duan Ling still said nothing, he finished: "You may continue carrying out the prime minister's plan. Though I don't know what he intends, this old man will assist as I can."

Seeing that no further questions were forthcoming, Duan Ling finally nodded his understanding.

The carriage stopped. "Ah—that's right," Fei Hongde said, as if he'd remembered one last thing. "When I saw you last night, I thought you resembled an old friend."

Before Duan Ling could react, Fei Hongde exited the carriage.

What had he meant by that? Fei Hongde's words shook Duan Ling to the core; there were too many possible implications within them. When Wu Du lifted the curtain, the first thing he saw was Duan Ling's ashen face.

"What's wrong?"

"He knows…" Duan Ling said, his voice shaking. "How does he know?"

Wu Du's head whipped around to stare at Fei Hongde's retreating back. Duan Ling grabbed his sleeve. Their eyes locked, gazes full of panic. Fei Hongde was strolling into the valley with his compass in one hand. Bian Lingbai had sent them with only two small squads of five soldiers each to avoid drawing unwanted attention.

"Don't worry," Wu Du said, seeming to recover his calm. "Before we left, Prime Minister Mu told me someone would be here to coordinate with us. It must be him."

"Why didn't I know about this?" Duan Ling asked.

"It was early in the morning; you were sleeping. I didn't want to wake you."

“But why didn’t you tell me later?”

“I forgot,” Wu Du said.

Duan Ling stared at him.

“Fei Hongde is impressive,” Wu Du said. “A great many scholars in the Central Plains have been his students over the years. You shouldn’t worry too much about him; if he intended to expose us, he would’ve done so right away. He could’ve revealed nothing to you. Since he did, maybe it means he trusts you.”

“What if he wants to use us to uncover Prime Minister Mu’s plans?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du’s brow furrowed, as if a headache was coming on. “Why are you overthinking this?”

Fine, Duan Ling thought. He could admit he was overcomplicating things. “He told me he used to counsel the late emperor.”

“Mm-hmm.” Wu Du hummed a confirmation. “That speaks to his character, at least.”

“When was that?”

“I don’t know,” Wu Du said. “I wasn’t on the same side then. But he might know Wuluohou Mu.”

Fei Hongde’s last words gnawed at Duan Ling, but he couldn’t share those concerns with Wu Du. Perhaps Fei Hongde had guessed his circumstances and found a time when Wu Du wasn’t within earshot to test his theory.

The valley around them was quiet. Fei Hongde beckoned Duan Ling to his side. “Zhao Rong, look at this mountain. A river flows beneath it, like a dragon; it’s an excellent spot,” he said.

Duan Ling remained unsettled. Fei Hongde laid his hand over Duan Ling’s and patted it, telling him silently to relax. “Where do you think your uncle buried the things he wished to give you?” he asked.

After mulling the question over, Duan Ling said, “Well, it’s not really for me… But, um, if I were him, I wouldn’t dig a hole. That’s too obvious.”

“Indeed,” Fei Hongde said. “The bluffs of Qin Ridge are perilous; excavation here would be difficult to say the least. But there are many mausoleums from the previous dynasty scattered throughout this area. I’m guessing your uncle hid the treasure in one of these. Geomancy is an art of the Han people. ‘The buried body carries qi; qi rides on the wind, is dispersed by the wind, and is confined by water. The way of qi collection is therefore called feng shui.’”[17]

These words conveyed great wisdom; suddenly, Duan Ling’s thirst for knowledge overcame his fear of Fei Hongde. He looked around and saw only a mountain with a river flowing around it. “Perhaps the treasure is in this mountain.”

“I’ll go down and take a look,” Fei Hongde said.

Duan Ling replied quickly, “Please be careful.”

Chapter 66

FEI HONGDE DESCENDED the slope. When Duan Ling moved to follow, Fei Hongde waved him off; he thus settled down on a nearby rock. Wu Du, standing behind him, opened his waterskin and handed it down for Duan Ling to take a drink. The soldiers milled around lazily, like they were merely out for a hike.

A gentle breeze blew, contributing to the sense of idle summer pleasure. The stream reflected flecks of golden sunlight. Once again, a strange feeling of familiarity—the feeling he'd had in the corridor the night before—washed over Duan Ling.

As if, somehow, he'd seen all this before.

He turned his head to look at Wu Du, who had sat down beside him. Wu Du raised his eyebrows in response.

"I…" Duan Ling began, then hesitated.

"You what?" Wu Du asked.

What he wanted to do was lean on Wu Du. Unease overtook Duan Ling; this place, this scenery, everything spread before him was so beautiful it made him feel empty inside.

Barely a second later, Fei Hongde's scream tore through the valley, echoing from further down the stream.

"Someone's here!" Wu Du said. He shot to his feet and shoved Duan Ling behind him. The soldiers rushed toward the commotion, one after another. Worried this was a trap intended to lure them away, Wu Du stuck close to Duan Ling's side. Soon after, they heard another distant rustle.

Their attacker was hiding in the forest.

"They're still there! Who is it?" Duan Ling exclaimed.

Duan Ling rushed to the carriage and snatched up his bow and quiver, but before he could set an arrow to the string, Wu Du grabbed him around the waist and slid down into the gully. Fei Hongde had disappeared. A

figure flashed through the trees in the opposite direction. Duan Ling caught sight of the motion and swiftly loosed an arrow.

“Protect Mister Fei!” Wu Du shouted.

The soldiers rushing down to the bottom of the gully discovered Fei Hongde lying face down beside the stream, motionless. Another small stream divided the gully; Wu Du had just reached its banks when the assassin disappeared into the forest—it was too late to intercept him.

Duan Ling chased after the shadow alone, splashing over the small stream ahead of Wu Du. He gripped his bow and looked around.

Across the stream was a dense forest. Something rustled within the trees. Under the mixed bright sunlight and forest shade of the early autumn afternoon, Duan Ling felt as if he was in an unexpectedly languid dream.

“Who’s there?” he called across the stream.

Within the overlapping light and shadow beneath the trees, a man dressed in black assassin’s garb moved slowly and deliberately. The trees blocked Duan Ling’s line of sight; he couldn’t locate his target. The masked man’s eyes narrowed slightly, as if he was smiling, and he silently threw a stone. It landed with a noisy clatter on the nearby cliff face.

Whirling, Duan Ling pointed his arrow toward the noise. A strong wind blew, and all the trees rustled; the masked assassin took advantage of the sound to escape through the forest.

Duan Ling was creeping toward the cliff when a hand thumped onto his shoulder from behind, and he nearly shrieked aloud.

“I’ve been calling you for ages—didn’t you hear me?! Why’d you run off?” Wu Du, having tracked him into the forest, sounded angry.

He’d shouted “Zhao Rong!” as he chased him across the small stream; his boots were soaked through. Duan Ling, unused to his new name, had entirely missed that Wu Du was calling for him.

“There was someone here,” he said. “A man. I’m sure I saw him.”

“I said, don’t wander off!” Wu Du grabbed him by the collar and shoved him against a tree. “Have you already forgotten about Helan Jie? This person hit Mister Fei with a single arrow from across the stream without revealing himself; what if they’d wanted to kill *you*?”

“Okay, okay,” Duan Ling said, obediently acknowledging his wrongs.

Wu Du sighed, looking around again. “You scared me.”

Seeing the anxiety written clearly across his face, Duan Ling suddenly felt touched. Wu Du didn’t know his true identity; he hadn’t once thought of using him for anything—he was genuinely worried for him.

“The sound I heard came from over there.” Duan Ling pointed into the depths of the forest.

“If there was someone, he’s long gone. Were you thinking he’d hang around and wait for you to catch him?” Wu Du scoffed.

Maybe you scared him away, Duan Ling thought.

Despite what he’d just said, Wu Du began examining the area. After a moment, he glanced back in confusion. “Come on, why are you just standing there?”

Duan Ling hurried to catch up to Wu Du. He looked around but didn’t see anything amiss. Wu Du bent and picked up a pebble, then looked up at the cliff face in front of him. “A diversion. This pebble is from the stream bank.”

Wu Du being so observant surprised Duan Ling. He would never have noticed that a single rounded pebble lying on the ground differed from the surrounding rocks. Wu Du cleared the vines from the cliff face where Duan Ling had heard the suspicious noise and uncovered a cave with a slight breeze coming from inside it.

“Should we take a look inside?” Wu Du asked.

“Is Mister Fei okay?” Duan Ling asked in return.

“Safe for now. He was only shot in the shoulder.”

“We should go back,” Duan Ling said, but he poked his head into the cave as he spoke. Was this the entrance to the treasure hoard? Would there be booby traps or just a mountain of gold and silver?

“Are you going inside or not?” Wu Du said.

“Maybe not,” Duan Ling hedged, backing away. “I’m not all that interested in money. Let’s go back.”

The pair returned to the rest of their group in the gully. Fei Hongde's trained reflexes had saved his life. The moment he'd heard the twang of the bow from across the stream, he'd dropped to the ground. Though the arrow came from a mere dozen steps away, the split-second reaction had been enough to save his life.

Wu Du pressed a cloth on Fei Hongde's shoulder to stop the bleeding as the group rode back toward Tong Pass. Everyone's thoughts were racing. Upon their arrival, Bian Lingbai was at first shocked, then flew into an unbelievable rage.

"What on earth were you all doing?!" Bian Lingbai hollered, personally lashing the soldiers dozens of times with a discipline whip before he finally calmed down.

Duan Ling didn't mention the cave entrance to Bian Lingbai, and Wu Du didn't either.

Fei Hongde, in contrast to the rest of the room, was calm. "General, why are you so angry? Life and death are the will of heaven."

Bian Lingbai took a moment to look over Fei Hongde's injuries before pacing around the room. "I must apologize that you sustained such serious injuries because of me. We've yet to discover the assassin's identity —the audacity of him to do this in my domain!"

Though the arrow wound in Fei Hongde's shoulder wasn't serious, he'd broken his leg when he tumbled down the hill. Wu Du had set the bone on the way back, but Fei Hongde would be confined to bed for two or three months. Attempting to comfort Bian Lingbai, he said, "General, don't worry yourself. The approximate location has been confirmed; I'll have Young Master Zhao return there with some of your men."

"Should I…send a thousand men to guard the mountain?" Bian Lingbai asked.

"There's no need," Duan Ling said. He and Wu Du had re-covered the cave mouth with vines, but he felt it was unlikely to be the treasure's actual location; otherwise, if the assassin knew about it, he would've already taken everything out. No one would turn down so much money. "Uncle, I'll go look again in a couple days. After we find the treasure, we'll bring it back to avoid any more trouble."

“Very well then,” Bian Lingbai said, partly to himself. “That will do.”

Bian Lingbai didn’t ask again about Fei Hongde’s injury, as if he’d forgotten about it. Though he appeared kind, Duan Ling saw that, in truth, he was self-serving. So long as nothing got in the way of his personal interests, he didn’t much care.

When the commander left, only Fei Hongde, Wu Du, and Duan Ling remained in the room. Fei Hongde cast a sly look at Duan Ling.

After a moment’s thought, Duan Ling said, “I’ll prescribe some medicine to heal your muscles and strengthen your bones, if you’re willing to take it.”

“Not bad,” Fei Hongde said. “With that under consideration, I still can’t tell your family’s background.”

Duan Ling didn’t bother with a retort. He handed Wu Du a piece of paper to write out the prescription—it’d be best to avoid any possible suspicion if the sheet was discovered.

“What?” Wu Du asked with a confused glance at Duan Ling.

“I’ll tell you the ingredients, and you write them down,” he said.

“Oh, so you’re ordering me around now?” Wu Du looked Duan Ling pointedly up and down.

“Come on, just write it,” Duan Ling said, pushing a brush over and grinding some ink for him.

“Are you stupid?” Wu Du asked. “Were you planning to have Mister Fei pick his own herbs after this? Make him the medicine and bring it over.”

Duan Ling realized he was right, so they bade Fei Hongde farewell. Fei Hongde smiled as the two young men left the room bickering. Wu Du wrote a prescription, but they started arguing again about which ingredients should or shouldn’t be used.

“You know medicine now?” Wu Du finally snapped. “And how many years have you studied, compared to me?!”

“It’s too strong!” Duan Ling insisted. “Mister Fei is elderly!”

Duan Ling abruptly realized that just as prose resembled its writer, medicine resembled its prescriber. The physician’s temper was often

revealed in their prescriptions. Once the thought occurred to him, Duan Ling burst into laughter mid-argument.

A muscle jumped in Wu Du's jaw. "The conflicting properties of these ingredients are exactly what will serve to strengthen his muscles and bones as he heals. What do you know, anyway? There's no better physician than your Master Wu."

"Okay, okay," Duan Ling relented.

He'd intended to prescribe milder ingredients to help Fei Hongde recuperate over the first few days, but Wu Du wouldn't budge, so he gave in. Wu Du left to gather the ingredients, and Duan Ling followed after him. The pair were inseparable; even if they'd been arguing, they still couldn't be parted from one another. Duan Ling was amused despite himself.

The next day, Duan Ling decocted the medicine and brought it to Fei Hongde to drink. When Bian Lingbai came for his usual visit, he found Duan Ling in Wu Du's company once again.

"Why are you two always together?" he asked.

The assassin you took in wants to skin me, we just haven't told you yet, thought Duan Ling.

Beside him, Wu Du sneered, "Bian Lingbai, the more often you stick your nose where it doesn't belong, the faster you'll die. Understand?"

Bian Lingbai snorted. Whenever he wanted to speak with Zhao Rong, he found Wu Du attached to him like sticky candy, impossible to get rid of. It was like he was seeing Zhao Kui's sinister shadow all over again, an intimidating presence that made him constantly uncomfortable. Fei Hongde and Bian Lingbai exchanged a few words, reviewing the expenses of buying iron weapons from Western Liang as well as the current border defense situation: how many thousands of troops from Xizhou, how many thousands from Yang Pass, and so on. Bian Lingbai was reluctant to say too much in front of Wu Du, but he still spoke, frowning throughout. Duan Ling took silent note of everything, well aware that Fei Hongde was using this method to leak secrets to him.

Halfway through their conversation, a soldier came in with a report.

Bian Lingbai listened and relayed the news to the group. “The bridal party from Western Liang has arrived. I’ll go and receive them; feel free to stay here and chat with Mister Fei. I’ll summon you later when it’s time for a toast at the banquet tonight.”

“All right,” Duan Ling said.

When Bian Lingbai was gone, Fei Hongde gave Duan Ling a meaningful look. “Do you remember it all?” he asked.

Duan Ling had decided there was no point in hiding anything from Fei Hongde anymore. He nodded.

The bridal escort from Western Liang had arrived earlier than expected. The group of seven—five standing, two seated—were glistening with sweat in the humid weather. They inquired after Miss Yao right away, hoping to meet her.

“According to Han customs, you may not see the bride before you escort her away,” Bian Lingbai explained.

The leader of the group was Shang Leguan, the son of Western Liang’s cavalier aide. He said, “I don’t have to see her myself, but can one of my men see her? This is my trusted companion; we’ve been close since we were children.”

He gestured toward one of the seated men. He was dressed in a simple military uniform, as if he was an ordinary guard, but he had a naturally reserved air about him. Bian Lingbai studied this young man. He was aware the Tanguts had different customs from the Han; he could at least allow them a glimpse of Yao Jing from a distance. After a moment’s hesitation, he nodded.

Shang Leguan spoke a few words to his companion, who nodded and hummed his understanding. The remaining guards, too, glanced at the young man from time to time, as if he was the one in charge.

Bian Lingbai found this strange, but he didn’t pry. “You’ve traveled far, and it’s getting late,” he said. “Shang-gongzi, why don’t you stay tonight in my residence, and we’ll continue making the arrangements tomorrow?”

Shang Leguan looked again at the young man, who gave a small nod. From that alone, Bian Lingbai could guess that the young man's status was higher than Shang Leguan's.

"I… I want t-to ask s-something."

Hearing the young man's unexpected stutter, Bian Lingbai masked his surprise as best as he could as he replied, "Gongzi, please speak."

"His name is He Mo," Shang Leguan said. "His words carry the same weight as mine. It's like this: Caravans traveling between the north and south at Tong Pass are a great source of information. I'm sure you have your own…*subordinates* for gathering such intelligence. From the Central Plains to Xichuan, your network is vaster than ours."

Bian Lingbai nodded, noticing that this He Mo seemed slightly agitated. His lips moved, and everyone fell silent; nobody dared speak over him. Bian Lingbai revised his estimation again: It was clear the young man was of quite high status in Western Liang.

"I want you to help me c-collect information and f-find someone." He Mo held up a finger for emphasis. He circled it toward everyone in the hall and said, "Have them wait outside."

Confused, Bian Lingbai dismissed his people. Only Shang Leguan stayed behind, closing the door to the hall firmly. Bian Lingbai could see this was no simple matter.

"Please, speak freely," he said at once.

"You m-must keep this a s-secret," the young man said.

"Of course."

"H-he is a H-Han named Duan Ling. Do you know him?" The young man met Bian Lingbai's gaze unwaveringly as he spoke.

"Duan Ling?" Bian Lingbai gave it some thought and responded, "No. Why are you looking for him, He-gongzi?"

"I-if you find him…" He Mo said. "Three hundred yi of gold. As thanks. One hundred yi from m-me."

Bian Lingbai was struck speechless at the sum.

“O-one hundred yi f-from a second person.” He Mo glanced at Shang Leguan, who nodded again. “And o-one hundred yi from a th-third. Th-three hundred total.”

One hundred yi of gold? One yi of gold was twenty-four taels. One hundred yi of gold—that was two thousand four hundred gold taels, and three hundred yi would make seven thousand two hundred taels… He was offering four hundred fifty catties of pure gold.

Since the fall of Shangzi, Southern Chen had been required to pay eight thousand taels of gold in tribute to the Liao Empire each year. He Mo had just offered Bian Lingbai a sum nearly equal to an entire year’s tribute. Bian Lingbai felt rather lightheaded.

“Three hundred yi of gold for his head,” he confirmed.

“What head?!” He Mo roared, slamming his hand on the table and spilling the tea.

Shang Leguan immediately turned to calm him down, and Bian Lingbai hurriedly corrected himself, “Yes! You want him alive, I misunderstood!”

Only then did the young man’s anger subside. He had wielded the power of a young lion in his outburst just then—and suddenly, Bian Lingbai had an idea of who he really was.

Chapter 67

"DO YOU HAVE A PORTRAIT?" Bian Lingbai asked.

"I'll d-draw you o-one," He Mo replied.

Three hundred yi of gold! Bian Lingbai would dig three feet deep into the earth bare-handed to find this man—he would turn over the entire land of Great Chen if he had to.

And so the matter was settled. After promising he would deliver a portrait of the man in question, He Mo retired to his rooms.

Duan Ling and Wu Du had been out purchasing medicinal herbs; upon their return, they paused to observe a group of Tangut men unloading sundry things from their caravan.

"Getting a wife sure isn't easy these days," Wu Du remarked. "Having to give away boxes and boxes of stuff… A poor bastard like me will never be able to afford one."

"The Tanguts have plenty of money. Just selling horses would have them set for life," Duan Ling said. He looked at Wu Du sidelong, feeling a little sour at the prospect of him marrying—as if what belonged to him would be taken away—but he offered a reluctant promise anyway: "When you're ready to take a wife, I'll save up the money for you."

"*Tch*," Wu Du snorted in obvious amusement.

After a few more such remarks, the pair went back inside to prepare Fei Hongde's medicine. As Duan Ling sat outside the door crushing herbs with a mortar and pestle, he could hear Wu Du and Fei Hongde talking inside.

"You two have taken such good care of me, despite my being a stranger. I find myself deeply indebted to you."

"We're all but rootless duckweed drifting about in the world," Wu Du replied. "My master used to say that whenever we're out in the world, we need no reason to take care of one another." There was a long pause before Wu Du continued. "Sir, do you have an idea of who the assassin might be?"

Fei Hongde didn’t answer. In the ensuing silence, Duan Ling couldn’t resist stealing a glance inside—only to discover that Fei Hongde was studying him in return.

Bian Lingbai had been hunting for the assassin since the ambush, but Fei Hongde had said almost nothing about the incident since they’d returned. Duan Ling had wondered about this as well—but now that Wu Du had asked the question, he realized it was impossible for someone as observant and learned as Fei Hongde to have no speculations on the matter. Could a personal grudge have been the reason for the attack?

“Was it the Tanguts?” Duan Ling asked.

Upon their return, Duan Ling had examined Fei Hongde’s injuries alongside Wu Du. The wound in his shoulder was the work of a thin, black cast-iron arrow with grooves designed to induce further bleeding, a type mounted bandits from the Western Regions and Tangut territories often used. The culprit might have been a Western Liang assassin; it was entirely plausible for Western Liang to attempt an assassination of Bian Lingbai’s trusted aide as a warning, or provocation. But had it truly been a meticulous political plot, Western Liang surely wouldn’t have employed a one-hit assassin stupid enough to use his own obviously recognizable arrows. Which meant anyone could be the culprit—even Helan Jie.

“My guess is an assassin from Western Liang,” Fei Hongde finally said.

“Could it be someone from the bridal escort?” Duan Ling asked.

Fei Hongde shook his head. “Do you remember the bandits you encountered on the way here?”

Dots began to connect in Duan Ling’s head.

“General Bian is merely carrying out his role as a middleman in this affair,” Fei Hongde elaborated slowly. “Young Mistress Yao’s marriage is part of a long-standing deal between Western Liang and the Yao clan of Huaiyin.”

“What deal?” Duan Ling asked, stepping back into the room and closing the door behind him. He passed Wu Du the crushed herbs, and Wu Du began to decoct the medicine.

“A deal of trade, and of alliance,” Fei Hongde explained. “Yao Fu needs warhorses. He needs the power to keep Xichuan in check. Most importantly, he needs an alliance with Western Liang to resist the pressures of Han Weiyong of Liao’s Southern Court. Since the fall of Shangjing last year, the stretch of the Silk Road passing through Western Liang’s Shazhou and Jincheng has been blocked; the Yao clan need this path reopened for Jiangnan’s silk trade to run.”

“Does Prime Minister Mu not know about this?” Duan Ling asked.

“He is aware,” Fei Hongde replied, nodding approvingly at Duan Ling. “But Yao Fu doesn’t want to take this matter to the imperial court. If the court gets involved, restraints would be placed on him.”

“Right. Because once Yao Fu and Western Liang formally cement an alliance, the imperial court would try to take control of the trade route,” Duan Ling said.

“Yao Jing’s marriage is only the first step in the Yao family’s efforts to create an opening,” Fei Hongde said with a leisurely calm. “If everything goes to plan, she will marry into the Shang clan, which has close ties with the queen dowager of Western Liang. Their nation is currently divided into two factions: The queen dowager and the late king’s maternal relatives from the Tuyuhun tribe form one; after the death of Western Liang’s king, Consort Helian and her son were also taken under the queen dowager’s wing. The Shang family, who serve as the cavalier aides, and the founding cabinet members are the backbone of their power. The second faction consists of the court officials led by the late king’s elder brother, Helian Da. This group has a closer relationship with Liao’s Southern Court.”

Duan Ling nodded in understanding. “Then does Southern Chen’s court know of this marriage alliance?”

“What do you think?” Fei Hongde asked. “I suspect the appearance of the bandits was no accident—they were sent to disrupt the marriage alliance between the Yao and Shang clans. Or perhaps…Yao Jing isn’t marrying into the Shang clan after all, but into the royal house itself.”

Thanks to Fei Hongde’s educational explanation, Duan Ling was finally getting a grasp on the situation. It indeed seemed plausible that the Liao-friendly faction in Western Liang would want to prevent the marriage

—but then, what connection did this alliance have with the attack on Fei Hongde?

"What do *you* think?" Duan Ling threw the question to Wu Du.

"I didn't understand a word of that," Wu Du replied carelessly.

Fei Hongde laughed. Wu Du wiped his hands and tossed the towel aside. "I can't follow the logic of you educated people," Wu Du added. He ordered Duan Ling, "Take this and apply it to Mister Fei's wound."

"Mister Wu is a free spirit—a gull flying high over the world," Fei Hongde said, still chuckling.

"Nothing but a hero defeated by poverty, a shadow of my former self," Wu Du replied, just as casual.

And how old even are you, to sound so ancient? Duan Ling scoffed to himself.

As Duan Ling applied the medicine, Fei Hongde spoke up again. "I shared something of a friendship with Yao Jing's mother in the past, so I'd hoped to speak with her. But just as she arrived, I've become confined to my bed. Gongzi, if you happen to be free, might you pay her a visit on my behalf?"

The request took Duan Ling aback, but he soon grasped Fei Hongde's true intent. It wasn't a simple visit he was after; Yao Jing's marriage into the Shang family must be dependent on certain demands from Yao Fu, so making her acquaintance could be a good source of information. Perhaps they'd catch wind of something significant.

He shot Wu Du a glance, and Wu Du waved a hand. "Go if you want."

"What should I say, though? Do you have anything you wish me to convey to her, sir?" Duan Ling asked Fei Hongde.

"Tell her…" Fei Hongde paused, then continued after some thought: "Never mind. Everyone has their own destiny; there's no forcing these things. But I strongly suspect it isn't Shang Leguan that Yao Jing is marrying, but someone else. Ask her if she's aware of this. Once we have her answer, we can decide our next steps."

It was becoming increasingly clear to Duan Ling that Fei Hongde had never cared a whit about Bian Lingbai. To him, the general was just some brute. It was the Yao family's marriage alliance with Western Liang that was likely his core reason for coming to Tong Pass.

Duan Ling and Wu Du emerged from Fei Hongde's room and looked across the manor toward the courtyard where Yao Jing resided.

"Is she in there now, you think?" Duan Ling asked.

"Just call out to her," Wu Du said. "What are you dragging your feet for?"

"I'm shy."

In his mind, girls were basically a completely different race. His father had taught him almost everything—except how to talk to a girl. Maybe Li Jianhong didn't know how he'd managed to win Duan Xiaowan's heart either.

Wu Du leapt onto the wall and peered down into the courtyard.

"She's inside drawing," he reported back. "Go on in. I'll skip the meeting—keep my proper distance from the ladies and all."

Still, Duan Ling couldn't shake his awkwardness. Yao Jing's steward was sweeping the yard; when he peered outside to see who was passing by, he spotted Duan Ling.

"Young Master Bian! Oh, please do come in!" he beckoned.

It took Duan Ling a moment to realize *he* was Young Master Bian. But when he heard a soft exclamation of surprise from inside, he braced himself to enter. Yao Jing rose to her feet to greet her guest, shifting her position to offer Duan Ling the seat of honor and ordering tea to be served.

"Since you're the general's relative, allow me to call you *Tangge*," Yao Jing said with a smile.

"Miss Yao, there's no need to be so polite. Please make yourself at home here," Duan Ling said.

As far as family ties went, Duan Ling's supposed aunt had married Yao Jing's uncle, so they were technically distant cousins. But before her marriage, a maiden was only allowed to see paternal cousins, not maternal

ones. Given that Yao Jing was currently staying under someone else's roof, it was exceedingly clever of her to refer to Duan Ling as her tangge: the address used for a paternal older cousin. This both implied a closer relationship between Yao Fu and Bian Lingbai and helped sidestep any unnecessary gossip.

Duan Ling felt immediate sympathy for Yao Jing. It couldn't have been easy for her growing up.

"The bridal escort from Western Liang arrived earlier today," Duan Ling remarked as he sipped his tea.

A slight smile graced Yao Jing's lips. "I've heard. Has Bian-xiong seen Young Master Shang yet?"

"Your groom?" Duan Ling thought for a moment, then said, "No, I haven't, but I'll have to meet with him when I get a chance."

"And has Young Master Shang come personally?" Yao Jing asked.

"Mm-hmm," Duan Ling responded. "You're marrying into the Shang family, right?"

Looking somewhat lost, Yao Jing nodded; it seemed obvious that she didn't know. But regardless of whom she married—be it Young Master Shang or a member of Western Liang's royal family—what awaited her wouldn't be a simple life of harmony between husband and wife. Duan Ling had no idea how to console her, but Yao Jing smiled anyway.

"I hear the Tanguts drink heartily and ride like the wind. If my tangjie[18] Yao Zheng was here, she would love it," she said.

"The noble families are decent enough. They won't be brutes," Duan Ling said.

At that moment, the steward reappeared and interrupted their conversation. "My lady, there is…a group of Tanguts coming this way. I don't know if you—"

A commotion erupted outside the courtyard before he could finish. Yao Jing seemed bewildered by what was happening, but Duan Ling—who understood the Tangut language—knew at once that it was the young men from the bridal escort arriving to cause a ruckus. Among the Tanguts, Mongols, Rourans, Xiongnu, and other nomadic peoples who roamed the

lands beyond the western frontier, there was a wedding tradition that differed from those of the Han people: They serenaded the bride-to-be. Once the engagement was confirmed but before the bride was formally escorted to her new family, the groom would gather his friends and pay the maiden a visit. They would scale the wall of her courtyard and sing to her from above, and the maiden would respond with her own sweet songs for all to witness.

The Shangs couldn't possibly be in the dark about the difference in customs, so this uproar could be chalked up purely to the playful nature of boys.

"Pay them no mind," Duan Ling said. "Just stay where you are. I'll go and send them away for you."

"Is this what they call serenading the bride?" Yao Jing asked, apparently having done her research.

"Yes," Duan Ling replied. "They'll do three verses in total. I'll sing something back on your behalf; they'll leave after that."

The first round of serenading occurred outside the courtyard wall. Wu Du—watching from where he sat on the roof, a stalk of grass dangling from his lips—cast the group a glance and quickly wrote them off. He, too, knew it was a nomadic tradition.

The gist of the first verse was this: "*Oh beautiful girl, tell me, why do you turn away? Soon we will be married, and gaze at each other night and day…*"

The young men hopped onto the wall for the second verse.

At the resounding chord that followed, Duan Ling nearly spat the tea he was drinking in surprise—these men had even brought lutes! Duan Ling was entertained despite himself. He gazed out the window to see a row of sumptuously dressed young men perched on the wall, singing boisterously as they plucked their lutes.

The second verse's lyrics were: *"If you remain so shy, when will I behold your gorgeous face?"* According to Western Liang's customs, the betrothed maiden should come out into the yard at this point, veiled, and stand quietly. Once the young men began hollering, she would respond with her own song.

“How lovely,” Yao Jing said. The young men’s voices held such vitality, brimming with the passion and wonder of love.

“The song is written by a Persian poet,” Duan Ling explained. “The part they’re singing means from now on, my garden will only be planted with the flowers you love. I will sing only for you, and let you fly freely in the sky.”

Yao Jing sighed, soft and quiet. But just as she was about to rise, Duan Ling cautioned her: “Don’t go out there.”

Chapter 68

WHEN THE SECOND merry verse came to an end, allfell silent on the wall. The sound of a tanpura cutthrough the quiet. Only a few tentative notes were plucked, as though the player was testing the strings, before a rich, melodious voice began to sing.

Duan Ling stood, straightened his robes, and went into the courtyard to receive the young men. This was also part of the serenade tradition: If the bride was too shy to emerge, her brother was allowed to step out in her stead. Since young men within the same tribe generally knew one another, oftentimes the groom was already a good friend of the maiden's brother or her other relatives. When the brother responded in place of the bride, it signaled his approval of the marriage and allowed the groom to proceed with offering the betrothal gifts. Conveniently in this case, it was quite acceptable for Duan Ling to answer on Yao Jing's behalf.

He still remembered several Tangut songs he'd learned in the past, albeit only a few short verses; hopefully it was enough for the occasion.

The young man was seated atop the wall with the tanpura cradled in his arms, his voice rising and falling. One leg was drawn up and propped on the wall while the other dangled freely, his face turned to show only his profile. The early afternoon sun spilled into the yard from behind him, obscuring his figure in its dazzling glow. He was wearing Tangut riding robes in a deep navy blue, embroidered with the tribe's totem, the wild goose. Four precious lapis lazuli rings shone on his fingers as he plucked the strings of his long-necked instrument.

As soon as the young man's song ended, Duan Ling opened his mouth to respond with his own. His melodious voice was gentle and rich, flowing like the Kherlen River of the steppes.

Wu Du glanced back toward the yard and froze at the sight before him. Duan Ling's face, bathed in sunlight, wore an easy smile. His fine features and the rosy flush on his fair complexion gave him the appearance of a lush tree in full bloom—brimming with life, scattering its sweet fragrance on the vernal breeze.

Letting himself fall backward, Wu Du lay down on the roof, crossing one dangling leg over the other. He closed his eyes, basking in the sun and listening to Duan Ling's singing. Moments later, the tanpura joined as accompaniment—the young man, it seemed, also found Duan Ling's voice pleasing to the ear. As he played, the young man happened to look down into the courtyard and promptly stilled in surprise.

Caught up in the moment, Duan Ling kept on singing his verses despite the music stopping. He hadn't gotten a good look at the young man earlier and was caught completely off guard when he leapt down from the wall right into the courtyard.

What're you doing? You aren't supposed to come in! Duan Ling thought, his song unfinished.

But the young man rushed straight for Duan Ling.

Shocked speechless but still amused by the young man's display, Duan Ling ducked inside the building to continue his song. But the young man, relentless, stayed right on Duan Ling's heels.

This drama sparked greater excitement in the other young men of the bridal escort party, and with an uproarious cheer, they too swarmed down into the courtyard, raising a huge ruckus. Up on the roof, a baffled Wu Du heard Duan Ling's running footsteps heading toward the inner hall, but when he opened his eyes and swept a look down at the courtyard, no one was there. Brows drawn low, he hopped down from the eaves.

"Wait, wait, wait!" cried the young man with the tanpura as he chased Duan Ling through the inner hall and into a room in the side wing. "Wait! Stop!"

At the sound of his voice, a shock so great went through Duan Ling it was as if he'd been struck by lightning. He whirled around and saw Helian Bo.

The sight of his old friend left him wordless.

Helian Bo was in a similar, dumbfounded state, like he was dreaming. With an almighty shout, Duan Ling ran toward Helian Bo and the two locked one another in a tight embrace. Almost instantly, they realized the danger of such familiarity and broke apart. Thankfully no one else was around to witness them.

“Duan…Ling!” Helian Bo’s lips trembled; he stepped forward again, wanting to hug Duan Ling once more.

Tears filled Duan Ling’s eyes—he never thought he’d run into Helian Bo, especially at a time like this. But considering the circumstances, he exclaimed, “Don’t ask! I’ll explain everything later!”

Perplexed, Helian Bo clung tightly to Duan Ling’s hands.

“Quick, go back!” Duan Ling urged. “I’ll come find you later!”

A commotion had erupted outside the room as the rowdy boys gathered around Yao Jing.

Duan Ling shook off Helian Bo’s grasp and said firmly, “Helian! Listen to me!”

Undeterred, Helian Bo tugged on Duan Ling’s sleeve. “W-we’ll t-talk over th-there—”

“No, we can’t, not right now—I promise I’ll come find you later tonight!” Duan Ling exclaimed. He gestured for him to lean closer. Helian Bo, already tall even back at Ming Academy, had grown even more so. Still confused, he obediently bent down, tilting his head for Duan Ling to whisper in his ear, “I’m Zhao Rong right now. Don’t call me Duan—”

“*What’re you doing?!* Let go of him!” Wu Du’s furious shout interrupted.

He’d caught up to the pair, but the scene he’d stumbled upon looked as if Helian Bo had Duan Ling caught in his arms and was pressing his face close to kiss him. The sight froze Wu Du for a split second before rage engulfed him.

Helian Bo released Duan Ling and spun around to face Wu Du, snapping, “Get lost!”

Before Helian Bo could register what was happening, Wu Du had already darted forward, grabbed him by the collar, and punched him.

Please, let me die, was Duan Ling’s single mortified thought.

At Helian Bo’s pained shout, the rowdy noise outside quieted at once, and his guards rushed in to find Wu Du still punching him. Sabers sprang from sheaths.

“Stop!” Duan Ling roared, throwing himself between the two men and forcing Wu Du to back off.

Helian Bo, though certainly in a sorry state, wasn’t badly hurt. His basic martial arts skills had helped him fend off some of the blows, and Wu Du had clearly held back some of his strength, meaning only to teach him a lesson.

Wu Du jabbed a finger at Helian Bo as Duan Ling pushed him to one side, blocking him with an outstretched hand. “What were you doing, getting handsy with him?! Touch him again and I’ll kill you!”

“That’s the crown prince of Western Liang!” Duan Ling hissed.

Wu Du snorted derisively. “I’d beat him up even if he was the emperor.”

Duan Ling was, once again, struck speechless.

Helian Bo staggered back to his feet and met Duan Ling’s imploring gaze. He seemed to understand; rather than get angry at Duan Ling, he merely shot Wu Du a scathing look before he left.

Unfazed by the threatening glares from Helian Bo’s guards, Wu Du began checking over Duan Ling. “What did he do to you?”

“What could he do? We’re two guys!” Duan Ling exclaimed, exasperated.

Wu Du didn’t answer, turning Duan Ling’s face to scrutinize him more closely. Duan Ling showed no signs of having been forced by Helian Bo. Finding nothing amiss, Wu Du’s eyes wandered down, lingering on Duan Ling’s lips. Still flustered as he was from his surprise encounter with Helian Bo, Duan Ling’s eyes remained slightly red-rimmed. When their gazes collided, he flushed crimson. Both of them pulled away in an awkward hurry.

“If he tries anything with you again, I’ll teach him a lesson,” Wu Du declared.

The scuffle with Wu Du had happened so fast it was only now Duan Ling noticed a part of his sleeve was torn from Helian Bo’s earlier tugging. He didn’t see the missing piece anywhere, though; Helian Bo must’ve run off with it. Duan Ling found this both hilarious and baffling.

Wu Du tossed Duan Ling a towel for him to wipe his face. “The Tanguts are all barbarians; they’d even screw horses. What do they know about shame?”

“Okay, okay,” Duan Ling said soothingly, though his thoughts were elsewhere. The appearance of Helian Bo meant there was someone who could swear proof of his identity—but would anyone believe a foreigner? Initially, Duan Ling had only thought he needed to convince Bian Lingbai of his identity as Zhao Kui’s nephew so he wouldn’t be killed. Yet with the

situation becoming inconceivably convoluted, the possibility of Bian Lingbai discovering his *true* identity was…terrifying.

And how would Helian Bo react? He'd always been a straightforward person with no head for calculation, which spelled bad news if he started digging around for information. Duan Ling was more worried Helian Bo would be pulled into this mess than he was about himself.

"How many men are in the Tangut party?" Duan Ling asked.

"Less than ten," Wu Du replied. "I'm going to teach them a lesson *tonight*."

"Don't! It wasn't what you thought."

"What was it then? Tell me."

What am I supposed to say?! Duan Ling screamed internally.

Elsewhere, back in his own accommodations, a thrilled Helian Bo was pacing back and forth in his room, a half-finished portrait on the table. Shang Leguan knocked and stepped inside to call for him, and Helian Bo followed him from the room to meet with Bian Lingbai.

Duan Ling was unbearably anxious. He didn't know what to do next—he needed to meet with Helian Bo in private and explain what was going on, but it was impossible to slip away from Wu Du. Suddenly, inspiration struck.

"I'm going to see Mister Fei," Duan Ling declared.

Wu Du had been sitting around stewing in petulant anger, but at this, he stood and changed into a fresh set of robes to follow Duan Ling out, sword in hand.

"Do you have to act like this?" Duan Ling said, exasperated.

"Stop yapping and go," Wu Du snapped.

Thus Duan Ling had no choice but to go see Fei Hongde. He reported that Yao Jing thought she was marrying Shang Leguan, and Fei Hongde nodded.

"We should remain in close contact with the Tanguts to determine if there's anything suspicious about the bandit incident. General Bian's men

seized the bandits' possessions; have them send men to identify the items. If there's any evidence, it can be passed along to Shang Leguan to act on it."

Duan Ling considered this plan, then nodded, awed by Fei Hongde's calculations—it was indeed the better move to hand the evidence to Shang Leguan if there were those opposed to Helian Bo's marriage.

Bian Lingbai showed up without announcement. At the sight of Duan Ling, he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Duan Ling hesitated, awkward. He didn't know whether Bian Lingbai had been informed of the fight between Wu Du and Helian Bo. As soon as Bian Lingbai looked from him to Wu Du, however, it was obvious he'd been informed of everything. "Wu Du," he said, his tone sharp, "you have my respect as a guest here, and for protecting Zhao Rong. But do not make trouble under my roof."

Wu Du smirked at him. "Not only will I cause trouble where I please, I'll kill your entire family too! What're you going to do about it, get that assassin who doesn't even have one whole hand to kick me out?"

His outburst left Duan Ling speechless.

"Wu Du! Do not push me!" Bian Lingbai shouted.

"Wu Du, enough!" Duan Ling admonished him.

"What in the world happened today?" Bian Lingbai demanded.

What an utter disaster, Duan Ling thought. Aloud, he explained, "I was in the inner courtyard…singing. And then he burst in. And then… And then…"

"And then what?" Bian Lingbai said with a glower.

Duan Ling fell silent.

"Bian Lingbai." Wu Du growled a warning.

Duan Ling gestured at Wu Du to calm down and hurried to answer: "The Tanguts are an open, enthusiastic bunch," he said to Bian Lingbai. "Uh…um, he just wanted to be friends."

"He came to me earlier, asking specifically for your company," Bian Lingbai said. "I don't know what's going on, so I came to find out."

Wu Du leveled a death glare at Bian Lingbai.

“Well, I’m here to ask you two, aren’t I?” Bian Lingbai corrected with speed.

“He’s not going,” Wu Du answered with a frigid edge.

“I want to go. It’s perfect timing to help Mister Fei ask about a few things,” Duan Ling said. “Can I?”

Wu Du stood and left the room without a word.

Should I just tell him the truth? Duan Ling wondered as he jumped to his feet and chased after him.

Chapter 69

“WU DU, WAIT UP!” Duan Ling called as he sped downthe corridor. “Wu—”

Wu Du whirled and drew his sword. Duan Ling’s heart stopped, his words caught in his throat. He’d never seen such a guarded, cold expression on Wu Du’s face; his eyes were as calm as still water. Wu Du lunged forward, sword aimed straight for Duan Ling’s throat.

Terror flashed in Duan Ling’s eyes, and his stomach cramped with excruciating pain—a conditioned reflex that seemed to have been ingrained in him long, long ago.

He wants to kill me.

No. No, he wouldn’t!

He…

These three rapid thoughts flickered through Duan Ling’s mind in quick succession as Wu Du’s sword brushed past his cheek and struck metal with a *clang*, right next to Duan Ling’s ear. His breath hitched.

Wu Du’s blade knocked back the iron hook that had been reaching for his collar.

In one swift motion, Wu Du pulled Duan Ling into his arms with his free hand and—without looking—delivered another strike of his sword. His eyes, aloof, were firmly fixed on Duan Ling’s face, inspecting him to ensure he wasn’t injured. The spin had tilted Duan Ling off-balance; when he caught himself and locked eyes with Wu Du, it felt as though his heart stopped for a single beat.

Wu Du tightened his grip on Duan Ling’s waist, steadying him as his sword slashed down, streaking directly toward Helan Jie’s throat. Helan Jie dodged and, with a deft twist of his iron hook, caught Flashblade. The screech of metal on metal pierced the air as Wu Du’s blade arced off course, and both men pulled back.

This whole time, Helan Jie hadn’t said a word—he silently lunged forward with his hook, which Wu Du parried with another bright *clang*. Duan Ling belatedly realized Helan Jie had nearly snatched him away by the scruff. As Wu Du and Helan Jie exchanged several more blows, Flashblade’s length gave Wu Du a sharp advantage over Helan Jie’s short hook, forcing him back, step by step.

“Piss off!” Wu Du snarled.

Helan Jie shot him a venomous glare but swiftly retreated.

The fight had been short, but despite its brevity, Duan Ling’s back was soaked in cold sweat. He sagged against a pillar in the corridor, ashen-faced and gasping for breath. A knot twisted painfully in his stomach as he looked up at Wu Du, who—still furious—slid his sword briskly home into the sheath at his waist and stalked off down the corridor. Duan Ling squeezed his eyes shut, the knot in his stomach tightening until it was so agonizing he couldn’t speak.

“What’re you waiting for, me to carry you?!” Wu Du shouted from the far end of the hallway.

Duan Ling couldn’t muster a response. He found he had no strength to speak, though he didn’t know why he would suddenly react in such a way. The moment Wu Du had lunged at him with his sword, it was as if a fear buried deep within his memories had awoken.

“Lang Junxia, my stomach hurts…” he mumbled, dazed.

From the end of the corridor, Wu Du shot him a confused look. Abruptly realizing Duan Ling might’ve been poisoned, he rushed back to check Duan Ling’s pulse point on his wrist and peel his eyelids back.

“Huh? There’s no poison,” Wu Du muttered. He patted Duan Ling’s face. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Duan Ling stared at him in anguish.

“Come on, stop faking!” Wu Du said.

“Wu Du, my stomach hurts…” Duan Ling tried again, weakly.

Understanding dawned on Wu Du—Duan Ling was suffering shock from his close brush with death. Some people were prone to spasms when in shock; others suffered stomach pain from adrenaline and anxiety. He

hoisted Duan Ling onto his back and carried him to their room. After laying him down in bed, Wu Du rummaged around for some herbs and brewed him a thick decoction. Just being safely back in their room helped a little, and as the effects of the medicine spread through Duan Ling's body, he finally regained himself.

"Better?" Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling nodded. He gazed at Wu Du, eyes prickling. "I thought you were going to kill me."

"All right, all right," Wu Du said, placating him. He didn't know how to handle Duan Ling when he acted like this. "Helan Jie was right behind you; what would you have had me do?"

After ensuring Duan Ling had come to no harm, Wu Du busied about, tidying the cookware. Mixed emotions filled Duan Ling as he watched him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Wu Du carried on putting away the bowls without a word. Abruptly, he peered over at Duan Ling. "Are you…?"

He stopped halfway through his question, brows slightly knit.

Am I what? Duan Ling's heartbeat accelerated. Did Wu Du know something?

The two lapsed into silence. Wu Du studied Duan Ling, but before he could say any more, Duan Ling's eyes drifted closed; the medicine had made him drowsy.

Wu Du didn't attempt any more conversation. Once he finished cleaning, he lay down beside Duan Ling. They slumbered peacefully, blanketed in the warm afternoon sun filtering into the room.

"Dad!" Duan Ling's shout shattered the room's silence.

Wu Du gasped awake.

"Hey." He nudged the sleeping Duan Ling.

Still dreaming, Duan Ling rolled over and hugged Wu Du around the waist with surprising strength, burying his head in his chest. Exasperated, Wu Du stilled again, glancing down at the boy plastered to him. He'd

grown used to this. It had truly been a tough journey for this kid; none of the machinations here had anything to do with him. Duan Ling had only come to such a faraway place like Tong Pass to keep Wu Du company. At this thought, whatever frustration Wu Du had been holding onto all but dissipated.

Wu Du absently patted Duan Ling's back, as if soothing a child to sleep, and Duan Ling clung to him even tighter.

"He Mo wishes to know the background of the young man he encountered in Yao Jing's courtyard," Shang Leguan said to Bian Lingbai, sipping his milk tea with Helian Bo at his side.

Bian Lingbai had just about had it with these Tanguts, who were turning out to be, without a doubt, the most troublesome guests Tong Pass had ever received. One minute they wanted to see the bride before the wedding, and the next, they molested the boy who'd come seeking refuge with him. He'd often heard the Tanguts were a coarse sort without any sense of shame, and that certainly seemed the case after what he'd witnessed today. They wanted to marry Marquis Yao's daughter and take a young man from his household too? How they'd even landed on such an idea, he couldn't begin to guess.

"The boy is my nephew," Bian Lingbai replied after some thought. "The guard with him has a bad temper; he isn't someone I appointed. I do apologize if he offended you gentlemen."

Shang Leguan grunted a response.

"The boy's had a rough life, and didn't grow up with many luxuries," Bian Lingbai continued. "Ah… It would be to his good fortune if Young Master He shows him favor and wants a closer friendship, but…"

"Money?" With one blunt word, Helian Bo cut to the chase.

Bian Lingbai was at that moment trying to figure out how to get the boy's monetary value appraised. The Marquis of Huaiyin certainly wasn't short on funds. When the bride-price for Yao Jing arrived from Western Liang, it would be a simple thing to put on a show of delivering it to Jiangzuo while keeping a portion for himself. And if the Tangut groom happened to take a liking to that rosy-cheeked boy, Zhao Rong, even better.

Bian Lingbai was happy to part with him, so long as the bride-price increased commensurately. If it worked out, he could curry favor with both the powerful Shangs and with He Mo, whose status was surely much higher than he was letting on.

Helian Bo shot Shang Leguan a look, and Shang Leguan returned a slight nod, indicating he would see to the task.

"His…name?" Helian Bo asked Bian Lingbai. He toyed with the scrap of fabric he'd torn from Duan Ling's sleeve earlier, turning it over and over in his hand. Another bit of cloth had been stuffed into his nose to stop the bleeding from Wu Du's punches.

"Bian Rong," Bian Lingbai answered. "He has no courtesy name."

Helian Bo's brow creased; the answer didn't match what Duan Ling had told him. But since he'd already changed his surname once, it probably didn't matter if it changed again.

"Money," Helian Bo repeated, emphatically, but to Shang Leguan this time.

Shang Leguan gestured for Helian Bo not to speak further, as he'd understood. Bian Lingbai was overjoyed: Did this exchange mean the Tanguts would go back and prepare the money for him? First they'd offered that reward of three hundred yi of gold, and now this constant refrain of *money*—Bian Lingbai's ears filled with an imagined symphony of clinking ingots.

"Um…Shang-gongzi. About the portrait?" Bian Lingbai ventured.

Helian Bo and Shang Leguan both flapped a dismissive hand. Bian Lingbai didn't pry, figuring the drawing was probably not yet finished.

Entirely unbeknownst to him, what Helian Bo had meant by *money* was whether Duan Ling was lacking in cash—and his wave meant the reward of three hundred yi would no longer be required.

Come evening, a quiet voice called from outside Duan Ling and Wu Du's room. "Bian-gongzi?"

Wu Du carefully peeled Duan Ling's paws off himself and rolled out of bed to open the door. A Tangut man was waiting outside—it seemed the

Bian residence's steward had personally guided him to their room.

"Young Master Shang wishes to see you and Young Master Bian," said the Tangut man.

"We're busy," Wu Du replied with disinterest. He'd already forgotten his desire to teach these barbarians a lesson. "Young Master Bian is ill."

The Tangut man questioned the steward in a string of incomprehensible words, which the steward answered in kind. The man turned around and hurried away. Wu Du frowned deeply, his brows drawn low. He instructed the steward to send dinner to their room and dismissed him.

Inside the room, Duan Ling had awoken. The afternoon incident had left him badly shaken. He sat up in bed, looking worse for wear, and snuck a look at Wu Du to determine if he was still angry. Wu Du, however, seemed back to normal; as Duan Ling watched, he picked up a pole in the yard and began practicing his staff techniques.

"Hey. Wu Du," Duan Ling called to him.

"What?" Wu Du responded.

Duan Ling wanted to ease the tension between them, but didn't know what to talk about. After a pause, he blurted, "I miss home."

Wu Du considered him silently.

The statement was a true one. Duan Ling did miss Xichuan a little. He felt agitated here, where nothing made him comfortable and everything felt amiss. In Xichuan, despite the threat of Lang Junxia trying to kill him, he'd begun to feel comfortably at home in Wu Du's courtyard at the prime minister's residence.

"Then let's wrap this up as soon as we can and leave," Wu Du said.

Duan Ling studied Wu Du's expression—but he couldn't guess what he was thinking. "When's that?"

Wu Du drew back his makeshift staff. "Tonight."

"Then…" Duan Ling trailed off, hesitant.

As Wu Du returned the pole back to its place, a problem occurred to him—if he planned to steal Bian Lingbai's papers tonight, what should he

do with Duan Ling while he was gone? If he left him alone in their rooms, what about Helan Jie?

"…I'll go with you?" Duan Ling finished tentatively. He wondered aloud, not for the first time, "What does Helan Jie have against me? I haven't done anything to him."

Irritated, Wu Du repeated, "He just can't stand the sight of you. He wants revenge on me, so he wants to hurt you."

Duan Ling nodded. "I see…"

A commotion erupted outside—another group of Tangut attendants had arrived. Duan Ling's stomach dropped. What did Helian Bo want now?! If he came in shouting Duan Ling's name, he was done for. As soon as he'd woken up, Duan Ling had devised an elaborate story full of gaping holes to give Wu Du. If Duan Ling slipped up, he'd say that when he and his father sold medicinal herbs at Tong Pass years ago, Western Liang's prince had happened to be kidnapped by brigands, and he and his father had saved him by accident.

As a last resort, if Helian Bo showed up in person, Duan Ling would say something in Tangut to shut him up first. Helian Bo was a stutterer anyway; he'd only nod at whatever Duan Ling told him—and if Wu Du did get suspicious, he wouldn't be able to extract an answer from him.

Unfortunately, Helian Bo did not come himself.

When the group of Tanguts came inside, they first delivered two meal boxes, followed by two large chunks of lapis lazuli, a platter of gold bullion, ten deer hides, and two racks of deer antlers. To round off this display, they presented Duan Ling with a goose-feather hat.

Wu Du and Duan Ling were flabbergasted.

"Take these back; we don't need them!" Duan Ling exclaimed in Tangut.

"His Highness has prepared these items for you," an attendant replied in the same language. "Please accept them, for they are a sign of the friendship between you, my lord."

Wu Du turned to Duan Ling in utter disbelief. "You speak Tangut?!"

Duan Ling, stumped to the highest degree, fell back on his prepared lie. “I’ve…been to Western Liang in the past. I learned to speak a bit back when I used to make purchases at the markets. ‘Okay’ is ‘chiji’; ‘thank you’ is ‘tuji’. Wasn’t I singing a Tangut song earlier today?”

Wu Du was half convinced but wholly muddled.

“His Highness said he would be waiting for you outside the courtyard at midnight,” the attendant added. Without further ado, he saw himself out, leaving the gifts behind.

Duan Ling looked at the hat in his hand, decorated with a singular bar-headed goose tail feather dyed blue.

“What’d he say at the end?” Wu Du asked.

“I didn’t understand,” Duan Ling said, hastily playing dumb.

Wu Du stormed out into the courtyard after the Tangut man. “Hey, get back here! Don’t just leave after you’ve had your say! What’re you playing at?”

But the attendant must have received clear instructions from Helian Bo. In no time, he’d disappeared from sight.

Chapter 70

WU DU LOOKED OVER the gifts. There were thirty-sixbars of gold bullion on the platter, each worth twotaels of gold, making up seventy-two taels in total. The lapis lazuli chunks were the size of half a palm. The Central Plains didn't produce lapis lazuli—it had to be imported via the Silk Road, which made it astonishingly precious. Grinding even a tiny piece from this stone would create valuable pigment, and a chunk this size could be sold for almost a hundred taels of silver.

Duan Ling covered the gifts with a cloth. "I'll return all these," he said in a small, guilty voice.

Wu Du's answering scoff was heavy with disdain.

An idea struck Duan Ling. "Here's a thought: How about you go do your business tonight while I meet with him? Helan Jie wouldn't dare try and capture me in front of the Tanguts, right?"

"Meet him, my ass!" Wu Du exclaimed, raising a hand in anger.

Duan Ling scrunched his eyes shut and flinched away on reflex. But when the anticipated smack never came, he emboldened himself and said quietly, "Just this once. I'll use it as a chance to return everything and give him a talking to. You've got your work to do—if you miss this opportunity and the Tanguts leave, it'll be much harder to act."

Wu Du hesitated for a moment, but then a thought seemed to occur to him. The smirk that appeared on his face surely spelled trouble. "Sure. You should go," he said.

The change in his mood baffled Duan Ling.

"Go on. I agree with your suggestion. When are you heading over there?" Wu Du asked.

"Actually maybe I shouldn't. Forget it," Duan Ling said, quickly backtracking.

"Don't worry about me. If you want to go, I won't stop you," Wu Du said. When Duan Ling still looked doubtful, as if suspecting sarcasm, he

added irritably: “Master Wu is a man of his word—why would I lie to you? It’s not as if someone’s giving me candy for it.”

This new agreeableness made Duan Ling even more wary. “I should try to gather information from them at some point, right?” he tried to explain. “Didn’t Mister Fei say as much? And after you steal the evidence, you’re going to take care of Helan Jie and Bian Lingbai, so…”

“I said go,” Wu Du repeated, his tone entirely earnest. “I really won’t stop you.”

Duan Ling still felt this had to be a trick—why was Wu Du acting like a different person all of a sudden? Just to be sure, he confirmed one more time, “I’ll go, then?”

Wu Du made a shooing gesture—*go*.

“Not now. I’ll go in a bit,” said Duan Ling. “When night falls, you do your thing and I’ll do mine.”

Wu Du simply nodded. No further words were exchanged; they sat in an awkward and thickening silence. Some time later, apparently having learned Duan Ling had fallen ill, Bian Lingbai sent someone to ask after his welfare; they reassured the attendant and sent him away.

When night came at last, Wu Du produced a set of black clothes from a hidden compartment in his chest and changed.

Wu Du had a striking figure: tall and long-limbed, with broad shoulders that tapered into a narrow, toned waist. After donning his form-fitting assassin’s garb, he was a sight to behold, the trim lines of his body complemented by his handsome, sculpted face.

“I can’t believe you brought these clothes,” Duan Ling commented, kneeling to tie Wu Du’s black bootstraps for him.

“How else am I supposed to hunt for evidence?” Wu Du asked.

He retrieved a finely crafted thumb ring from the same hidden compartment, slipping it onto his finger and pressing down to test its concealed mechanism. A small well clicked open at his touch, filled with poison powder. This was Duan Ling’s first time seeing Wu Du’s tools of the trade. Wu Du handed Duan Ling a length of black cloth and tilted his head:

a silent gesture for Duan Ling to help him tie it over his face while he continued preparing.

An awkward silence hung in the room as Duan Ling fumbled with the cloth until, exasperated, Wu Du barked: “Are you trying to blindfold me so I can play hide-and-seek?!”

Duan Ling quickly tugged the mask down a little to reveal Wu Du’s eyes as Wu Du pinned four darts to his belt.

“Aren’t you taking your sword?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du waved a hand, glancing at himself in the mirror. “Am I recognizable?”

With that *body?* Duan Ling thought. *Who wouldn’t recognize you? You’d stand out from any crowd.*

Seeing Duan Ling’s thoughts written across his face, Wu Du scoffed. “You’re used to seeing me; of course you can tell.”

Then why’d you ask? Duan Ling thought with a huff. But Wu Du’s earlier irritation had seemingly subsided, and he didn’t sound sarcastic now either.

“Go on, then.” Wu Du shooed him off.

Duan Ling had thought to tell Wu Du to be careful, but as no one in the manor was any match for him, there wasn’t much of a point. As Duan Ling pushed his way out the door and strode into the courtyard, a blur of a shadow darted past—and with that, Wu Du was gone.

“Off so quick, huh?” Duan Ling muttered. He looked around the yard and expelled a heavy sigh. It already felt weird not having Wu Du around.

Wu Du’s voice rang out from the shadows: “What’re you standing around for? *Go!*”

Wordlessly, Duan Ling looked up and spotted Wu Du perched lazily on the eaves with his arms dangling over his knees, putting Duan Ling in mind of a big black cat.

“Don’t worry about me,” Duan Ling said.

“I’ll only follow you for a short stretch,” Wu Du said, impatient. “What if that cripple is waiting for you on your way? Now hurry up.”

Duan Ling obediently set off. He honestly wanted to go hunt for evidence with Wu Du; it would likely be much more fun than meeting with an old flame, or whatever Wu Du was imagining. But of course, business came first… Duan Ling's thoughts wandered as he walked, his surroundings silent save for the quiet rustle of the breeze. Yet even without looking, he sensed Wu Du shadowing him from the eaves above, flitting silently between rooftops, sometimes on his left and sometimes on his right.

"What're you peering around for?" Wu Du hurled a pebble at Duan Ling that landed just inside his collar; Duan Ling hastily shook it loose. Keeping his eyes forward, he walked down the long corridor.

"Helan Jie isn't lurking around," Duan Ling said.

"Lucky for him," Wu Du said, casually hopping down. "It's a perfectly dark night with a good breeze; I was itching to throw a dart at him."

Upon Duan Ling's arrival at the guest courtyard, his knock was answered by a Tangut attendant who promptly opened the gate and welcomed him inside. Duan Ling could still sense Wu Du hiding in the dark, keeping a keen eye on him until the attendant guided him safely inside.

He found Helian Bo talking excitedly with Shang Leguan, despite his stammers and awkward phrasings. Once Duan Ling had made entirely sure no one else was around, he finally broke into a grin and called out to his old friend.

"Helian," he said.

Helian Bo leapt up and engulfed him in another tight hug. Duan Ling wriggled away laughing and hopped onto his back, just as they'd done as boys. Riding around one on top of the other, they staggered about, laughing uproariously. This went on until Helian Bo, huffing for breath, collapsed onto the divan and dumped Duan Ling off.

Shang Leguan wisely left the room, closing the door behind him.

Duan Ling gave Helian Bo a friendly kick, then lifted the covers of the platters on the small table set over the divan. Finding some raisins, he grabbed a handful and tossed them into his mouth. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

“Bride!” Helian Bo cried miserably.

Duan Ling and Helian Bo had always shared a good understanding. Duan Ling asked, surprised, “Yao Jing is *your* bride?”

Helian Bo nodded, looking too put-upon for words. He gesticulated wildly as he stuttered through his explanation of the situation. Duan Ling pointed at him and laughed unapologetically, then attempted to throw raisins into Helian Bo’s open mouth—one of which ended up in his nostril instead. Helian Bo pressed down on one side of his nose and snorted out the fruit with a loud *pbbfft*. The two doubled over laughing once again. In their school days, whenever Helian Bo’s family had sent raisins from his homeland, he’d always horsed around like this with Duan Ling and Batu.

Recalling their childhood, Duan Ling was suddenly filled with a million emotions, the greatest of which was a poignant sorrow. Helian Bo patted him on the back and gestured for him to stop fooling around and listen properly.

On that fateful day when Helian Bo and his mother had escaped Shangjing, Duan Ling had refused to join them and adamantly remained in the city. Western Liang was bracketed by Liao to the north and Southern Chen’s capital of Xichuan to the south, so a route through the Taihang Mountains should have been the fastest way out of the besieged city. Unfortunately, Helian Da, the late king’s brother, had struck an agreement with the Han family of Liao’s Southern Court, effectively preventing Yelü Zongzhen from sending reinforcements to Shangjing for a time. It had been in both their interests to ensure neither Yelü Dashi nor Li Jianhong came out of that battle alive.

“Dashi?” Helian Bo asked.

“Dead,” Duan Ling replied. “He took an arrow after he escorted you from the city. He didn’t make it.”

Helian Bo sat lost in thought. His expression was complicated, and his eyes flashed with fury.

Nudging him with an elbow, Duan Ling asked, “What’s wrong?”

He looked at Duan Ling and shook his head.

Duan Ling had been clueless during his time at Ming Academy, but, later, at Biyong Academy, he'd figured out a few things. Yelü Dashi and Helian Bo's mother had almost certainly shared some clandestine relationship. Every time she had come to collect her son at the school, Helian Bo always appeared repulsed by her. Duan Ling and Batu had visited the Helian residence on several occasions, and while his mother had always been kind to his peers, Helian Bo himself had been reluctant to engage with her.

"It's all in the past now," Duan Ling said.

Helian Bo nodded. "Zongzhen l-looked. For you. Batu too. M-me too."

Duan Ling's eyes grew hot. He forced back his tears and gave Helian Bo a hard nod.

Before Shangjing had fallen, Yelü Zongzhen had dispatched reinforcements in an attempt to rescue Duan Ling. Ultimately, the effort had proven futile, and a once-magnificent, centuries-old city was reduced to rubble. The Liao and Chen armies had proceeded to clash with the Mongols in a fierce battle to the death. Searching for Duan Ling amid the chaos had been akin to searching for a needle in the ocean. Duan Ling recalled how he'd been the one to save Yelü Zongzhen's life when he was nearly assassinated by Han Weiyong's man back in Shangjing. Although they'd known each other for a mere few days, Yelü Zongzhen had proven himself a worthy friend.

As for Batu…

Li Jianhong's death, as well as the fall of Shangjing, were both directly caused by his people, the Mongols. Duan Ling couldn't help but feel conflicted. Since saying their goodbyes at the academy, they had ended up on opposite ends of the world, making true the saying, "Never to meet in life once parted, like morning and evening stars, forever divided."[19]

Helian Bo set down his cup and gestured again. "Zongzhen. Batu. Fought."

Of course they would've. Duan Ling, too, knew of the deep hatred that existed between Yelü Zongzhen and Batu's people. Because of it, it seemed they could only inquire about Duan Ling's whereabouts through

Helian Bo. Helian Bo added that they were both offering hefty sums as a reward for locating him, before proceeding to lay out the half-finished portrait he'd drawn of Duan Ling.

Duan Ling chuckled with pleasure at the drawing. Helian Bo had already shown an aptitude for art when they were in school, and his skill had improved greatly. Another thought struck him—though Yelü Zongzhen didn't know his identity as the crown prince of Southern Chen, Batu did. In that case, how would he have tried to find him? Could he have met with the fake crown prince? Duan Ling tensed at the thought.

Hastily, he asked, "And what did Batu say?"

"You might be d-dead. Batu said h-he wrote to your family. U-unknown if alive, in danger. You must be found, alive or dead—or he will flatten Southern Chen. Mad," Helian Bo remarked, still baffled by Batu's behavior. "What's it got to do with Southern Chen? H-his own people invaded Shangjing. Thank goodness you're alive. Thank goodness!"

Helian Bo gave Duan Ling a hearty slap on the shoulder, the rims of his eyes red.

So Batu had written to his "family"—which was to say, the imperial court of Southern Chen. But when Duan Ling tried to question Helian Bo further, he only shook his head; he didn't know any more than that. Batu must've kept Duan Ling's identity secret from Helian Bo as well. All he'd been told was that Batu knew how to reach Duan Ling but had received no response to his letter.

Even from this limited information, Duan Ling was able to put the pieces together: After Shangjing fell, Batu had heard the crown prince of Southern Chen had returned to court and dispatched a messenger—perhaps in secret, or perhaps with a congratulatory message on his father's behalf. But he and Batu couldn't be any more familiar with each other. Even if the false crown prince's response had been written by a scribe, the sentences couldn't have been in Duan Ling's style. Once Batu carefully interrogated the emissary who'd met with the crown prince, he would no doubt become suspicious.

How clever of him! But, still, what use was that—it wasn't as if Duan Ling could ask Batu to stand as his witness.

Frowning deeply, Duan Ling paced around the room. His eyes fell again on Helian Bo, and all at once he noticed that he didn’t seem to be quite the same boy who’d once wrestled with him every day at school. With his thick brows and large eyes, he had a gallant air about him. Sitting with one arm resting on the back of the divan, he radiated a kingly authority, yet remained approachable.

“Y-you lost weight,” Helian Bo said. “Hard?”

Their eyes met. After a long silence, Duan Ling quirked his lips in a small smile. “Very hard. But it was worth it to stay alive.”

Chapter 71

WU DU, his black clothes blending into the deep night,easily snuck into Bian Lingbai’s study. Pulling on silkgloves so as not to leave fingerprints behind, he searched through the dusty shelves of documents. They were stuffed with letters labeled by number, but after leafing through them, he promptly abandoned them as useless. He surveyed the room, then turned and threw himself down on the low divan before Bian Lingbai’s desk. Resting an elbow on his knee and propping his chin on one hand, he examined the calligraphy and paintings on the walls. His eyes swept across each frame, each item on display, as well as the brick floor and every decorative piece on the table; not a single spot was missed.

Elsewhere in the manor, Fei Hongde coughed softly in his bed. Though there was no breeze, the door to his room swung open, and soundless steps slipped inside.

“I wasn’t sure at first,” said Fei Hongde, his voice raspy. “But now that you’ve come to kill me, I am.”

An assassin clad entirely in black stepped further into the room, his sword reflecting the cool light of the moon.

“You really shouldn’t have come—it looks like a cover-up,” Fei Hongde said. “Where did you even find that fake crown prince of yours?”

“He’s a boy who has met Li Jianhong before. A schoolmate of that child,” replied the assassin. Already recognized, he untied his mask to reveal his fair and handsome face and a pair of sharp eyes. It was none other than Lang Junxia, who had pursued them all the way from Xichuan.

“You should kill him,” Fei Hongde said. “But allow me to hazard a guess: You’ve already tried, haven’t you?”

“I couldn’t do it. I was the one who brought him up,” Lang Junxia answered. “But I certainly did almost kill him.”

“You always make the attempt first, and only negotiate when you’ve failed.”

“That’s the way my shifu taught me: When you can kill, talk of terms is unnecessary,” Lang Junxia said.

Fei Hongde sat up, unhurried, and draped an outer robe over his shoulders. He gave Lang Junxia a pointed look. “But why would someone you’ve attempted to kill care to discuss terms with you?”

“I made three attempts on Li Jianhong’s life, yet in the end he still negotiated with me.”

“He was probably the only person in the entire world who would,” Fei Hongde said. He waved a hand toward a seat. “Sit down, Lang Junxia. It’s been a while. Why don’t we catch up?”

Lang Junxia narrowed his eyes, hesitating.

“I’m surprised to see a sword-wielder wearing prayer beads on his wrist.”

“Your eyes are keen as usual, Mister Fei,” Lang Junxia said.

“I’ve seen those prayer beads before somewhere,” Fei Hongde replied lightly. “It seems you still seek to live. Just as well. But if that’s the case, what harm is there in taking my old life to accomplish your mission?”

When Lang Junxia remained silent, Fei Hongde burst out laughing. “Does it make it harder to kill me when I willingly bare my neck?”

Lang Junxia’s expression shifted, and he slowly unsheathed his sword. Yet in the next moment, a voice rang out from the other side of the door.

“Mister Fei!” Bian Lingbai called.

Fei Hongde rose from his bed, but before he could answer, Lang Junxia’s sword was against his neck. Fei Hongde smiled, fixing his eyes on Lang Junxia, and spread his hands wide: *What will you do?*

“Mister Fei?” Bian Lingbai called again.

When he didn’t respond, a servant rapped on the door. Lang Junxia hesitated, unable to decide whether or not to slay the old man, as Fei

Hongde simply stood and waited for his final resolution, life or death a whim away.

Sensing something amiss, Bian Lingbai couldn't wait any longer and pushed the door open. "Mister Fei!"

Lang Junxia burst through the far window and leapt from the room.

"An assassin! Guards!" Bian Lingbai cried in alarm.

Seated in Bian Lingbai's study, deep in thought with his chin still propped in his hand, Wu Du was starting to get drowsy. He yawned, then shook himself awake and squinted around the room again. His brow stayed locked in its tight furrow. The switch he was searching for remained elusive —where could it possibly be?

A commotion rose outside.

"He fled toward the guest wing!" someone shouted.

Wu Du tensed, ready to make his escape, but the heavy patter of footsteps faded as soon as it'd come—the guards with their raised torches had passed right by. Bored again, he sat back down. Yet before he settled in, Bian Lingbai and Mister Fei burst into the room.

The instant the door swung inward, Wu Du raised his foot and kicked the desk over.

Before Bian Lingbai could lift the lantern to identify the black-clothed man who'd stolen his seat, the desk was hurtling toward him. "Gua __"

His cry was cut short by the force of the desk crashing into him, sending him flying out the door and across the yard; at the same time, Wu Du ducked out the window and disappeared without a trace.

"—uards!" Bian Lingbai finally expelled the rest of his cry as he landed in the pond with a great splash.

While chaos reigned across the residence, Duan Ling and Helian Bo were still sitting with their hands clasped, tearfully reminiscing and utterly

oblivious to the commotion outside, when Shang Leguan burst into the room.

“What’s wrong?” Duan Ling asked.

Shang Leguan looked at Duan Ling first, then at Helian Bo. Seeing Helian Bo’s obvious ire, he quickly backed out of the room again.

“A g-group, my uncle—th-they won’t allow a m-marriage with the Yao family,” Helian Bo told Duan Ling, pacing the room. Almost to himself, he muttered, “I th-think Bian Lingbai m-made a deal with him.”

As he said it, Duan Ling made the same leap: *The bandits!* The mounted bandits who’d intended to sabotage Yao Jing’s marriage alliance. “What do you think they’ll do?”

Helian Bo glanced at Duan Ling and dragged a finger across his neck. “Disobedient…kill.”

Duan Ling’s heart lurched. “Kill whom?”

Helian Bo gestured, implying that Duan Ling should be able to guess—it was precisely whom he was thinking of. Shock crashed over Duan Ling like a wave.

Bian Lingbai!

Helian Bo took a seat at his table and flipped over the half-finished portrait of Duan Ling. He began sketching the surrounding terrain, labeling landmarks and circling a few places. Duan Ling nearly spat blood at the sight.

“Hidden troops,” Helian Bo explained.

Duan Ling was shocked speechless for a moment. “How many?” he asked, already sensing it wouldn’t be an easy number to face.

Helian Bo lifted two fingers—twenty thousand men.

“All bandits?” Duan Ling asked.

Helian Bo shook his head: He didn’t know. The mounted bandits who’d ambushed him and Wu Du were perhaps only a small portion of the larger force, then. What were they plotting, to plant so many troops across the hills of Tong Pass? Duan Ling stuffed the paper into his breast pocket.

“I can think of a way to lure them out,” he said to Helian Bo.

Helian Bo waved, then looked meaningfully at Duan Ling. The wave was a refusal of his offer; the stare meant those people were his own tribesmen.

“Trade?” asked Duan Ling.

Trade was a word he, Helian Bo, and Batu had often bandied between them back at Ming Academy, bartering for food or trinkets. Simple-minded as boys often were, some of their things had changed hands so many times that, by the end, no one could remember whom the original owner had been. Helian Bo’s smile returned. He took a seat back on the divan and propped a foot on the table. Though he was merely seventeen, he already exuded the aura of authority befitting a ruler. He gestured at Duan Ling. “Speak.”

The feeling that washed over Duan Ling was both familiar and strange. They had all grown up—and now, here he was, about to represent a country and make deals with Helian Bo. But he had nothing he could rightly offer in exchange. What was more amazing was that Helian Bo had never questioned his background: what his true identity was, and what had brought him to Tong Pass. Duan Ling had simply said *trade*, and Helian Bo had asked him—naturally—to make his offer.

“The reopening of the Silk Road,” Duan Ling said without hesitation.

Helian Bo contemplated the proposal but didn’t respond right away.

Duan Ling knew the reopening of the Silk Road was something Western Liang hoped for, as well as the Marquis of Huaiyin’s goal for the marriage alliance. It was no great leap to guess that what Helian Bo most wanted would be control over the Silk Road.

“Once the Silk Road reopens, merchant caravans will be required to carry travel permits stamped with the Helian clan’s seal to go through Tong Pass,” Duan Ling added. “The Tong Pass Garrison will recognize only the seal, not the person carrying the papers.”

Helian Bo’s eyes lit up, but he still didn’t answer.

Duan Ling’s mind raced as he assessed the situation. Was his proposal feasible? Once Bian Lingbai was dead, a new border general would be appointed to Tong Pass; all the effort Yao Fu had invested in Bian Lingbai would be for naught. Control of the border—and who passed

through it—would fall into Mu Kuangda's hands, and Duan Ling had no influence whatsoever on matters of tax collection or trade routes.

If he regained his rightful place as the crown prince, he would certainly have a chance at persuading the court to recognize Helian Bo as the scion of Western Liang. But right now he was a nobody. What were the chances he could get Mu Kuangda to agree to his plan?

"Who a-are you?" Helian Bo asked.

"Aren't I Duan Ling?" He spread his arms to show Helian Bo he was the real thing. "If you're concerned, I'll dispatch a letter right now on a fast horse to Xichuan. It would get there within a day. You can take your time to consider this carefully, or send word home to ask for the opinion of your people."

The commotion in the yard finally became impossible to ignore. Someone shouted, "Capture the assassin!"

The two immediately fell silent. Duan Ling looked around, realizing someone had intruded into their courtyard. While Helian Bo sat confused, Duan Ling wondered at once if Wu Du had been captured. Since everyone was apparently trying to catch the assassin, Wu Du seemed to have escaped for now. But if Bian Lingbai came to personally investigate and discovered Duan Ling meeting with the Tanguts alone, it would confirm Wu Du was—

His thoughts ground to a halt as the doors flew open with a resounding *bang* and two guards crashed inside. Helan Jie stormed through after them and swung his hook at Duan Ling. The hook caught him by the collar, and Helan Jie yanked him into the air at the same time Helian Bo sprang from the table, drawing his saber. Duan Ling contorted in midair to dodge the gleaming blade as it slashed toward Helan Jie.

Helan Jie switched his grip, catching Duan Ling with his damaged left hand as he lashed out with the hook on his right and knocked Helian Bo's saber out of his hands.

"I knew Wu Du wasn't here!" Helan Jie cackled, dragging Duan Ling behind him as he fled the house and leapt onto the courtyard's wall. "You're coming with me to see the general!"

Duan Ling had a supremely bad feeling about this—Helan Jie must have lost track of the assassin he was chasing and cut his losses, deciding to

take him as a hostage instead.

“Let me go!” Duan Ling struggled furiously, jabbing his elbow into Helan Jie’s stomach.

As he fought his captor, he heard the crisp snap of fingers next to his ear.

A man in black lunged at Helan Jie from out of nowhere with a dizzying whirl of speed. His sword was aimed straight for Helan Jie’s throat, forcing Helan Jie onto the back foot. He faltered atop the wall, off-balance, and tumbled down into the yard. The man in black snatched Duan Ling from Helan Jie’s grasp in a flash and pulled him over.

Helian Bo and his men flooded into the yard, bewildered by the chaos, but the man in black had already scaled the wall with Duan Ling in his arms. Helan Jie roared with fury and launched himself over the wall in pursuit.

Chapter 72

"WE HAVE TO GET BACK, quick!" Duan Ling urgedthe black-clad man. He moved to wrap his armsaround the man's neck, but the man put Duan Ling down and took his hand instead, leading him over another wall.

They didn't get far before another ambush struck from the side: Two daggers sliced through the air, aimed at the man in black's wrist. He reacted lightning fast, slashing his sword toward his assailant's throat without loosening his grip on Duan Ling. One of the daggers struck the man in black's wrist with a metallic *clang*, and their assailant dodged back, narrowly avoiding the blade that had come within inches of his throat.

Their assailant was another man wearing all black. Duan Ling was dumbfounded—who was *this*?

Duan Ling's rescuer jumped down into a courtyard, and Duan Ling followed, casting a quick look around. As soon as the man let go of his hand, their assailant dashed over and grabbed Duan Ling's arm, pulling him behind his back and taking a protective stance.

But the first man in black had no intention of leaving—he took a single retreating half step before stabbing toward them again. It seemed he intended to recapture Duan Ling, who stood briefly frozen, too shocked to speak. The second man shoved Duan Ling to the side—safely out of reach—and launched four darts across the courtyard that stopped the first man in his tracks.

Duan Ling took the chance to scamper off to the side, watching the two men in black exchange rapid blows. He couldn't figure out who was who. Was the slightly taller one Wu Du? Abruptly, he recalled that Wu Du hadn't taken his sword when he left—but just as this thought crossed his mind, the men collided fiercely once more, and their weapons were knocked from their hands. The daggers embedded themselves in a nearby pole, while the longsword flew into the bushes. The pair abandoned their weapons and threw themselves into hand-to-hand combat, fists and feet flying.

Oh no, thought Duan Ling. Now that the fight had become pure hand-to-hand, he had even less of an idea of who was who in the dark. In the blink of an eye, one of the black-clad men leapt to his feet and snatched the daggers from the pole, while the other somersaulted across the courtyard and retrieved the sword. The knife in the dagger-wielder's left hand skimmed the pond's surface, drawing ripples through the water and misting the air with fine droplets. When the dagger came level with his chest, he hooked his right-hand dagger over the top of it, crossing the blades before him.

Duan Ling cheered internally at this display; it was a technique Li Jianhong had once taught him called the Arc of Light, which used both palm and sword techniques. He'd never imagined it could be used for a double-dagger style.

There was no more doubt in his mind—the assassin with the daggers must be Wu Du!

The man slashed both hands downward at once with a power only the Guardian could've withstood. An arc of bright blade qi lashed through the air, glinting with the moonlight. The man with the sword leapt up, twisting his lean body in midair to parry the strike with his blade. Using his momentum to assist, he repelled the doubled blows of the qi and the daggers with four resounding clangs.

The dagger-wielder cried out, and from his voice, Duan Ling confirmed he was indeed Wu Du. But his Arc of Light was not fully dispersed; it slashed across the sword-wielder's face, knocking away his mask.

Duan Ling's breath hitched as it started to fall away.

Yet the sword-wielder didn't linger; he caught his mask before it could fall and launched himself off the ground with a kick, disappearing over the courtyard's wall.

At last, Wu Du removed his own mask and turned to Duan Ling with a look of abject confusion. "Who was *that*?"

Duan Ling, equally puzzled, shook his head.

Shouts rose from the adjoining courtyards—the guards had obviously run into the escaping assassin.

“Quick! Let’s go!” Duan Ling cried, grabbing Wu Du’s hand and dragging him back toward their room.

Catching Duan Ling’s intentions, Wu Du moved to pull a robe over himself to cover his stealth clothes. Duan Ling exclaimed, “No, strip!” and began swiftly peeling off Wu Du’s clothes.

“Boots too! Keep the dagger,” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du paused, but complied.

The pair ran out of the courtyard together in the same direction as the assassin. Duan Ling prayed the man hadn’t yet escaped into the night.

Meanwhile, Helian Bo’s subordinates, the Bian residence’s guards, and Helan Jie had pursued the assassin to the main hall’s courtyard, where the man leapt onto the wall and disappeared. Arriving in the nick of time, Wu Du—his upper body and feet bare, wearing only a pair of trousers—yelled, “Stop right there!”

Wu Du scaled the wall after him, but the assassin was already long gone. Duan Ling cheered internally: They’d been able to join the crowd at the last second—*thank goodness!*

Bian Lingbai gaped at the sight of Wu Du. When Helan Jie looked back, he, too, paused. Wu Du scanned the crowd and scoffed, affecting bafflement at the attention. “What a bunch of losers; you can’t even win against one assassin. In the end it was me, Master Wu, who scared him away.”

Duan Ling almost wanted to cover his face.

“Where…” Bian Lingbai began. “Wu Du, where were you earlier?”

“I was sleeping; can’t you tell?!” he snapped back.

Bian Lingbai turned his ire on Helan Jie, hollering, “What’s going on? That wasn’t Wu Du?!”

Right on cue, Duan Ling turned a befuddled gaze from Bian Lingbai to Helan Jie. “Where did that assassin come from?”

Bian Lingbai wore an expression of total puzzlement, while Helan Jie stared grimly back at Duan Ling and Wu Du.

A few minutes later, Bian Lingbai, Duan Ling, Wu Du, and Fei Hongde—walking with the support of a cane—convened in Bian Lingbai's bedroom.

"Everything's still here," Bian Lingbai said. "What was the assassin after?"

Duan Ling pretended to examine the treasure map on the table, but as soon as Bian Lingbai looked down at it as well, he and Wu Du quickly scanned the layout of the room. Duan Ling cast his eyes over the shelves while Wu Du examined the floor. At last, Wu Du's gaze fell on a single bluestone tile in the far corner.

"The reason I troubled Mister Fei this evening was to inquire about the location indicated on this treasure map," Bian Lingbai said. "I've been sleepless with worry. If you're well enough to travel, why don't we set out to take a look at the place ourselves?"

Bian Lingbai was a little too impatient for Duan Ling's tastes. Then again, delays led to complications; how could he not want to collect the treasure right away when he knew where it was? Still, Duan Ling couldn't help but wonder if this new urgency had any connection with Helian Da's plot.

"Certainly," Fei Hongde replied. "It might have been by accident, but you've saved this old man's life tonight, General."

"What was the assassin after?" Duan Ling asked.

"He was interrogating my reasons for visiting Qin Ridge the other day," Fei Hongde replied.

Bian Lingbai jolted, shaken. He seemed to have feared that answer, and Fei Hongde had confirmed his suspicions.

"Rest assured, General. Only the young master and I are aware of the location of the treasure at this time," Fei Hongde said. "You arrived just as I was about to mislead him, which is surely why he went to the study—to search for the treasure map himself."

Bian Lingbai nodded, his eyes narrowing. "I see…"

Was that really how it was? Duan Ling could find no holes in Fei Hongde's deductions, but he couldn't help but feel there was something

about it that wasn’t quite right—something he was missing.

“I imagine the assassin must be the same one who ambushed this old man by the gully at Qin Ridge that day,” Fei Hongde added. “The incident must have roused his suspicions, and he came to investigate. Thankfully, he was scared off by Mister Wu.”

Duan Ling was speechless.

Wu Du simply said, “But of course.”

Duan Ling was rendered doubly speechless, and looked at both of them in mute wonder.

Fei Hongde clasped Bian Lingbai’s hand and said in a low voice, “It could be the Tanguts. We mustn’t act rashly, General, or we risk exposing the treasure’s location. Wait a few days. After the excitement over tonight’s incident dies down, we’ll retrieve everything under cover of darkness to avoid further complications.”

“Mister Fei is wise,” Bian Lingbai agreed.

By now it was late; everyone returned to their rooms. Duan Ling let out a long sigh as he closed their door behind him. “So who was it? A Tangut?”

“Not possible. No one among the Tanguts has that level of skill,” Wu Du said. He narrowed his eyes and studied Duan Ling. Duan Ling sensed he had his own speculations but was keeping them to himself.

“You got very close to him,” Wu Du continued. “Did you notice anything? Any clues?”

“No—at first I thought he was you, so I wasn’t paying attention,” Duan Ling admitted.

“You can’t even recognize me?!” Wu Du cried, incredulous.

“You’re the only one dressed like this! Why would I think it was anyone else?” Duan Ling argued. A thought struck him. “He had a smell…”

“What smell?” Wu Du asked.

“…Sweat,” Duan Ling said. “He hadn’t bathed in days.”

Wu Du stared at him for a moment. “Never mind. Let’s just hit the sack. Tonight was a disaster.”

“Did you find anything?”

“No,” Wu Du replied irritably.

“I bet the secret chamber is hidden in Bian Lingbai’s bed—”

“I saw. I’m not blind,” Wu Du said.

Duan Ling nodded and crawled into bed. When Wu Du joined him, Duan Ling shuffled closer and gave him a sniff. Wu Du’s upper body was still bare, and he tensed awkwardly at the ticklish sensation. Duan Ling tried to think his way through the feeling of recognition he’d had earlier, but couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“What, you thinking about men?” Wu Du said.

Duan Ling flushed. “What are you talking about—”

Wu Du lifted his head and raked his eyes evilly over Duan Ling. “That Tangut barbarian didn’t touch you, did he?” he asked, running a groping hand down Duan Ling’s body.

“What’re you doing?!” Duan Ling yelped.

“You’ll dally with the barbarians but won’t let Master Wu touch you? Gods, if I wanted to have my way with you, you wouldn’t even be able to cry for help.”

Face bright red, Duan Ling tried to squirm free of Wu Du’s grasp, but Wu Du kept him firmly pinned to the bed, scrutinizing him with a wicked glint in his eye. Duan Ling’s heart pounded. His feelings tangled in knots as he worried whether Wu Du might actually do something. Wu Du stuck a hand down Duan Ling’s robes—yet all he did was retrieve that tiny golden ball, glance over it, and stuff it right back where he’d found it.

Duan Ling gaped at him.

Now he understood why Wu Du had let him meet Helian Bo without qualm—as expected, he hadn’t had a sudden change of heart. With the centipede on Duan Ling, anyone who dared try and strip or fondle him would get a nasty bite. Perhaps they wouldn’t die on the spot, but they’d suffer a pain to remember.

“I already told you,” Duan Ling said. “He won’t do anything to me.”

“Even if he did, it’s none of my business,” Wu Du said mockingly.

Duan Ling’s mouth twitched. Catching him unawares yet again, Wu Du stuffed his hand back into his robes and pulled out the folded sheet of paper. “What’s this?”

Remembering the earlier bargaining he’d done, Duan Ling replied, “Helian…gongzi said there are several troops planted nearby, waiting in ambush.”

“What?!” Wu Du asked, shocked, and Duan Ling quickly shared the information with him.

Finally, he said, “I… Um, I think Tong Pass is in danger. We should inform the prime minister as soon as possible, or there could be big trouble.”

“Not necessarily,” Wu Du said, having listened to Duan Ling describe the whole situation. He sat up and crossed his legs. “What if that barbarian was lying to you?”

“He wouldn’t,” Duan Ling said. “What good would that do him?”

The idea that Helian Bo might mislead him had never crossed Duan Ling’s mind. But now that Wu Du brought up the possibility, Duan Ling’s mind raced. Would Helian Bo lie to him? No—he didn’t think he would. Although he could admit the main reason he felt this way was their friendship, he also knew that, in this matter, Helian Bo needed to stabilize the situation in his court. He had no good reason to fabricate a map and lie to him.

He looked hesitantly up at Wu Du.

Wu Du turned the paper this way and that. The moment he flipped it over, he nodded with a grunt. “Yeah, he wouldn’t lie to you. I was overthinking it.”

On the back of the paper, Duan Ling realized with a start, was Helian Bo’s sketch of his own face.

Wu Du peered suspiciously at Duan Ling. “Not a bad likeness. Vividly realistic yet tastefully done. So, you didn’t sleep with him, but you two did spend the entire evening flirting and drawing portraits?”

“No—” Duan Ling hastily denied it, then grabbed Wu Du, who was trying to get out of bed. He wailed, “Please! There’s really nothing like that between us!”

The bed, draped in mosquito netting, was a tiny, cramped space that lent an awkward level of intimacy as the pair wrestled for a moment. Wu Du was too irritated to register the suggestive atmosphere; with a quick jab of his fingers under Duan Ling’s ribs, Wu Du rendered him instantly limp and got up to leave.

Aware that Wu Du was about to lose his temper again, Duan Ling wailed loudly and collapsed on the bed. Wu Du jumped and glanced backward.

Clutching at his belly, Duan Ling whined, “My stomach hurts, oww…”

Wu Du turned back to check on him, and Duan Ling stilled under his hands with a pleading stare. Wu Du quickly realized he’d been played. But after this little display from Duan Ling, his anger had all but deflated.

He poked Duan Ling’s forehead, hard. “You.”

Duan Ling opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. He knew Wu Du—nothing he said would make a bit of difference.

Chapter 73

"OKAY, OKAY, FINE. I'll lie back down," Wu Du grumbled, crawling back into bed.

Duan Ling finally relaxed. When they were resettled, he murmured in Wu Du's ear, "What should our next move be?"

Wu Du didn't want to listen to any more chatter. He rolled over so his back was to Duan Ling.

"Hey." Duan Ling caught his shoulder and tried to turn him back. "We have to think of a way to fortify Tong Pass. If that army of twenty thousand attacks, the pass will fall."

He put a hand over Duan Ling's face and pressed him back down on the bed. "Why do you care so much? It's none of our business."

"But…"

Wu Du remained stubbornly silent, ignoring him. But—what was to be done about the letter he'd promised Helian Bo? They had to figure out how to send the news back to the prime minister's manor. Would Mu Kuangda even agree to his terms? Regardless, now that they had this information, they couldn't just kill Bian Lingbai and leave—it would throw the whole region into chaos. While their initial plan had been to kill the general, steal the evidence, and go, the Tanguts were already watching Southern Chen with covetous eyes. Killing Bian Lingbai now might precipitate a full-scale invasion.

Duan Ling closed his eyes. He might as well sleep—the whole thing was trouble, no matter how he looked at it. Not to mention they still had no tangible evidence that Bian Lingbai planned to rebel, though Duan Ling was certain he harbored such intentions.

Later, in the dead of night, Duan Ling felt Wu Du stir beside him. Gently, Wu Du lifted the arm Duan Ling had wrapped around him and placed it aside. Then, still so gently, he nudged Duan Ling's leg sprawled across his waist and let it slip off to the side.

Do you need to be this careful just to go pee? Duan Ling thought.

Wu Du shifted over and soundlessly slipped out of bed. Padding catlike on his bare feet, he gathered the black clothes he'd put away earlier and donned them once more.

"Where are you going?" Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du jumped at the abrupt question.

"You have to take me with you," Duan Ling whispered urgently. "Come on, take me."

"It's the middle of the night. Why aren't you asleep?" Wu Du demanded.

"What about you?" Duan Ling could guess where Wu Du was headed. "Are you going to Bian Lingbai's bedchamber?"

Wu Du hummed an affirmative, and Duan Ling commended him inwardly—it was a smart plan. Their enemy had just escaped, so although the residence's security was heightened, Bian Lingbai himself would be at his most relaxed. After all, an assassin who missed his mark was sure to retreat, biding his time until the next opportunity.

Wu Du hesitated. "Don't wear your boots; they'll make noise. Let's go."

Duan Ling emerged in his snow-white underrobe, a comical contrast to Wu Du's stealthy attire. Duan Ling wanted to laugh at what a conspicuous target they made in the dark. What was the point of Wu Du changing into black clothes like this? If they were caught, they'd be caught together.

Just as he was about to take a step into the courtyard, Wu Du scooped him into his arms and carried him along as he leapt onto the wall.

Duan Ling wasn't a small young man, but Wu Du carried him effortlessly as he sped across the residence's courtyards. Finally, he stopped at a corridor within the residence and set Duan Ling down. Wu Du eased a door open and ducked inside, catching Duan Ling's wrist and dragging him along. They settled into a shadowed corner just as two night patrolmen passed by, thankfully overlooking the slightly ajar door.

As Wu Du scanned their surroundings, his ears twitched. He snaked an arm around Duan Ling's waist and, with another mighty leap, propelled them up onto a beam above. From there, he swung out over the eaves and landed on the roof. Duan Ling couldn't help but recall that night in Shangjing when Li Jianhong had taken him flying across the rooftops to save Batu.

Above the Qilian Mountains, the bright moon rises, traversing the vast sea of clouds.[20]

Beneath the full moon, a strange feeling sprouted within Duan Ling as Wu Du held him in his arms. It was as if his father had returned to his side.

Duan Ling let his head drop onto Wu Du's shoulder and circled his arms around his waist in a warm embrace. Wu Du was speeding along the last stretch of their trek. The simple gesture startled him so much he tripped, tumbling off the roof with Duan Ling in a shower of clattering tiles. Duan Ling clamped his lips shut over a scream as they crashed into the yard below, the commotion immediately alerting the nearby guards.

"Who's there?!"

"The assassin!"

Wu Du was ready to tear his hair out in frustration, while Duan Ling merely seemed confused. After they hid behind the garden's rockery, Wu Du clapped a hand to his forehead, his face contorted in misery as though his hard-earned reputation had just gone down the drain.

The guards emerged nervously with their weapons in hand to walk up and down the corridors. They searched every nook and cranny but found nothing. Wu Du picked up a rock and hurled it in the opposite direction, far out of the yard. It drew a high, clean arc in its flight, then clacked loudly as it landed on a rooftop dozens of feet away.

"Over there, after him!" cried a guard.

Wu Du waited until everyone had left their area before whispering furiously, "What were you thinking?!"

"Nothing—what did I do?" Duan Ling replied, clueless.

More guards had appeared to join the search. Wu Du dashed through the corridors with Duan Ling in tow until they reached Bian Lingbai's rooms. He glanced at Duan Ling, whose heart was racing, and put a finger to his lips. Two guards were stationed on either side of the main door, so Wu Du circled around to the back of the building and stopped under the bedroom's window.

Tall, barefoot, and dressed all in black, Wu Du paused and cocked his head to listen for movement inside the room. Everything was quiet—when Duan Ling closed his own eyes, it was so still he felt he could hear the sound of flowers blooming in the silence of the night.

"I can't believe he's not in here sleeping this late at night," Wu Du said, opening the window and hooking a leg over the ledge. Duan Ling followed and closed the window behind him. The room was empty, Bian Lingbai himself nowhere to be found. Perhaps he'd called an emergency meeting to discuss the situation after the assassination scare. The treasure map was gone from the table; he must've taken it with him.

Duan Ling groped around the floor for the tile they'd spotted earlier. "This one."

Wu Du stepped onto the tile and looked up but saw no hidden mechanisms on the ceiling. He gestured for Duan Ling to get up, and together, they examined the walls, where they at last came upon a groove with what appeared to be scrape marks from something metallic. Wu Du drew his dagger, jabbing it into the hole, and the wall shifted, then slowly slid open.

"Found it!" Duan Ling exclaimed.

Behind the wall was a small chamber with barely enough space for one person. It housed several shelves of dense, saddle-stitched books that compiled conspirators' names as well as great stacks of letters.

"Quickly," Wu Du urged him.

Duan Ling picked out a book at random and examined it under the moonlight—it was a ledger listing the first character of a name followed by a number, all the way down.

"This must be a record of bribes paid," he said. He didn't know enough court officials to match names with the isolated characters. Duan

Ling set the book aside, but when he moved to look through the letters, Wu Du stopped him.

“Don’t worry about the letters; we’ll go as soon as we find what we’re looking for. We can check the rest after he’s dead.”

Now that they’d discovered the hidden chamber, they could very well remove Bian Lingbai next—but doing so would introduce a host of new variables. If the Tong Pass Garrison mutinied, or if any of Bian Lingbai’s trusted aides knew about this chamber, it would spell trouble.

The pair were still rummaging through the documents when approaching footsteps sounded outside. Wu Du’s face fell. Moving silently, he pushed Duan Ling further into the hidden chamber and swiftly pulled the door in behind him.

Duan Ling was startled into silence.

Eyes closed, Wu Du counted the nearing footsteps. The instant they stopped and Bian Lingbai opened the main door, Wu Du shut the door of the hidden chamber, syncing the sound of both *clicks* with flawless timing.

“You tell me. What do *you* think we should do?” said Bian Lingbai’s voice outside the hidden chamber.

The tiny room was impossibly cramped, two people stuffed into a space that barely accommodated one. Duan Ling was pressed tightly against Wu Du. He couldn’t find anywhere to put his arms after trying to squeeze them in next to his body, so Wu Du lowered his head and allowed Duan Ling to loop them around his neck.

As their breaths mingled, Duan Ling felt the thrum of Wu Du’s pounding heartbeat against his chest, thundering like the hooves of a thousand-horse cavalry.

“I’ll depart tonight,” a grim, hoarse voice responded—Helan Jie. “The assassin won’t get far. I swore to avenge the loss of my hand.”

“What about the plan? You think you can just leave?!” Bian Lingbai exclaimed.

“Bian Lingbai!” Helan Jie’s raspy hiss was accompanied by an inkstone and brush-washer clattering to the ground, followed by the

toppling of a chair. Voice laced with threat, he said, “Do not forget who sent me here.”

Bian Lingbai quieted at once. Eyes squeezed shut, Duan Ling pictured Helan Jie pressing his hook against Bian Lingbai's throat.

"If you go now, who will take Helian Bo's damned life?" Bian Lingbai demanded, though his voice was much weaker now. "Don't forget, your master Helian Da may not want him to die in Southern Chen, but he'd be even less pleased if he died within the borders of Western Liang."

Duan Ling's heart lurched.

Helan Jie gave a hard, angry snort. "I will, of course, succeed in my mission."

"How can you be so certain—"

"This is not your concern," Helan Jie cut him off.

"Then when will you be back?" Bian Lingbai asked, sounding just as grim. "Give me a set time. My agreement with Helian Da remains unfulfilled; this matter must be resolved. We can't drag it out any longer."

"Choose a location for an ambush. I'll meet you there in seven days," Helan Jie replied. "As for how to lure Helian Bo out—that's your problem."

"There's nowhere suitable…" Frustration crept into Bian Lingbai's voice, and the sound of pacing feet echoed on the other side of the door.

Duan Ling glanced up and noticed the utter confusion in Wu Du's eyes. He lifted a hand, intending to trace some words of explanation on Wu Du's back, but before he could begin Wu Du caught his arm. He gave a small shake of his head—Duan Ling should remain still so as not to draw attention.

At the end of what little patience he had, Helan Jie snapped, "Right here, then. Now stop yapping."

"No!" Bian Lingbai scooped the map from his table in a panic. "This isn't a battle map!"

But Helan Jie didn't say another word—he'd left the room and disappeared in a gust of wind.

"Wait!" Bian Lingbai put away the map and ran after him.

Once the sound of footsteps faded completely, Duan Ling and Wu Du opened the hidden room's door, stumbling into the bedroom drenched in

sweat.

"Quick," Wu Du urged, "Bian Lingbai will be back any moment."

Duan Ling was still preoccupied by what they'd just heard. Distracted, he flipped through the remaining books and replied, "Ah…okay. Wait, found it!"

Wu Du stuffed the book Duan Ling held into his arms, picked him up, and leapt out the window. The second they dropped from view, the door clicked open—Bian Lingbai had returned.

That was close, Duan Ling thought, suddenly in awe of how precisely Wu Du had controlled their timing throughout the night's adventure.

Dawn was approaching by the time the two returned to their room. As Wu Du drew water to wash their dirty feet, he asked, "Did you get the right one?"

Duan Ling flipped through the stolen booklet, examining it in the early morning light. "Yes."

The untitled booklet was a record of horse sales, equipment expenses, and unpaid bills. Bian Lingbai apparently owed the Tanguts 112,000 taels of silver—no wonder he was so eager to unearth the treasure.

"We'll make our move today," Wu Du said. "Take a nap. I'll wake you once I've poisoned him, and we'll take our leave during the commotion."

"No." Duan Ling immediately shot down the idea. "We can't kill him now. Helian Da wants control over trade at Tong Pass; we just heard how big an army he has lurking nearby. If Bian Lingbai dies without paying his debts, Helian Da is sure to launch an attack, and Xichuan is right in the middle of moving the capital. If our defenses in the northwest fall now, the country will be thrown into chaos."

Wu Du frowned. "So we'll kill him and go back as fast as possible so we can tell Prime Minister Mu to send another general to hold the pass."

"Send who, though?" Duan Ling asked. "If we kill Bian Lingbai today, one round trip to Xichuan—even on the fastest horse—will take six full days and nights. Too much can happen in six days."

Wu Du grunted and lapsed into silence. When he noticed Duan Ling watching him expectantly, he snapped, “Well, you think of something! What’re you looking at me for? Didn’t I bring you along specifically to deal with stuff like this?”

Duan Ling contemplated the problem—and a brazen idea occurred to him. Helan Jie had gone after the mysterious assassin for revenge. The loss of a hand… Had the sword-wielding assassin been the one who cleaved off Helan Jie’s? If so, Helan Jie would be utterly determined in his pursuit; he would very likely be gone the whole seven days he’d declared. Seven days was more than enough time for Wu Du to make a round trip to Xichuan and return.

Helan Jie’s absence meant Duan Ling was temporarily safe. If Wu Du could deliver the ledger along with Duan Ling’s letter to Xichuan and urge Mu Kuangda to dispatch an imperial envoy who could broker an alliance with Helian Bo, then find a way to take control of Tong Pass’s garrison at the second Bian Lingbai died…

Chapter 74

WU DU WAS THE ONLY suitable man for the job, butwhat excuse could they give Bian Lingbai for hisdeparture? It wouldn't make sense for Wu Du to leave so suddenly without a good reason. In the end, Wu Du was the one to hit upon a solution; he told Duan Ling not to worry about it, and to focus on writing his letter.

Focus was what he sorely needed, because composing the letter took practically everything Duan Ling had learned in his life. He scraped every inch of his brain attempting to mimic the style Mu Kuangda used in his own memorials to the throne—which unfortunately gave his own writing the comical air of a young man trying to act old and mature. He drafted and tore up the letter, then drafted and tore it up again, over and over. Nothing sounded right, no matter how he phrased it. He needed to inform Mu Kuangda of the situation at Tong Pass and caution him adequately without sounding alarmist; he needed to put forward his sincere suggestions without Mu Kuangda detecting his tiny pinch of selfishness nor guessing that he shared a secret friendship with Helian Bo; and finally, he needed to provide a clear analysis of the relationships between Yao Fu, Bian Lingbai, and Helian Da.

Duan Ling organized his thoughts through his writing: Presently, Yao Fu and Bian Lingbai were in the same camp. Yao Fu had sent his niece Yao Jing to Bian Lingbai so she could be married into Helian Bo's branch of the Western Liang royal family. However, Bian Lingbai and Helian Bo's uncle had brokered a second agreement behind their backs—not only had Bian Lingbai betrayed Yao Fu, he also planned to have Helian Bo killed on the border between the two nations.

Should he mention Helan Jie's murder of the late emperor? Duan Ling weighed the idea but ultimately decided against adding another complication. Next, he proposed his suggestion: Use this situation as an opportunity to forge an alliance with Helian Bo that would offer both sides significant benefits, including shared control of the Silk Road and the elimination of the rebellious Bian Lingbai. In this deal, management of the

northern stretch of the Silk Road would be in Helian Bo's hands, while the southern stretch would belong to Mu Kuangda and the Chen imperial court. Helian Da's machinations would be exposed, Yao Fu's plans would be foiled, and Bian Lingbai would die.

However, the instant Bian Lingbai died, the loan note Helian Da held for thousands of taels would become bad debt, which would likely trigger an immediate assault on Tong Pass. Helian Da would attempt to seize control of the border city and march his men south, or, at the very least, sack the city before retreating. Unless a plan to safely hand off military control was established in advance, Bian Lingbai could not be killed—but as the man intended to revolt, he nonetheless should be removed with all haste.

By the end of his letter, Duan Ling had resigned himself to Mu Kuangda tearing his memorial to shreds, or flipping his table with a furious shout upon reading it. What in the world was he suggesting?! Surely it would be impossible for any competent military commander to take charge of the entirety of Tong Pass in just seven days.

Then, as if from the heavens, a brilliant idea struck him: Was *he* not the ideal candidate for this last endeavor? Bian Lingbai had told everyone Duan Ling was his nephew, Bian Rong. Given this, should his "uncle" meet with an untimely demise, Duan Ling would be in an ideal position to wield Bian Lingbai's military token and rally the troops to avenge him. Though this might be a strategy of last resort, Duan Ling nonetheless included it in his letter for Mu Kuangda's assessment. Once he finished, he handed the letter to Wu Du, who barely glanced at it. He merely skimmed through the ledger and shooed Duan Ling out the door to join him as he bade Bian Lingbai farewell.

Bian Lingbai had already had quite a night. Dragged out of bed yet again by Wu Du, he regarded them both with a look of pure misery.

"I have some business to take care of," Wu Du informed him.

Bleary-eyed, Bian Lingbai stared at them without speaking.

Wu Du added, "I'm leaving Zhao Rong in your care. If anything happens to him, I'll take your thrice-damned life."

With that, he darted out of the room.

Bian Lingbai sat with a blank look as he took a second to fully process Wu Du's words, then jolted in surprise. He turned to the sour-looking Duan Ling.

"…Where's he going?"

"He said he's searching for something called the Guardian of the Realm," Duan Ling answered.

Bian Lingbai stared at Duan Ling in sleepy confusion for another moment before understanding dawned on him. "Where's he even going to look? It's been lost for a year now."

"It might be…because of the assassin from last night?" Duan Ling ventured.

Bian Lingbai paced the length of the hall, shaking his head. "No, that can't be."

"What's the Guardian of the Realm?" Duan Ling asked.

"The late emperor's sword," Bian Lingbai answered. "Ever since his death in the Mongols' invasion of Shangjing—"

Though Duan Ling had heard it before, he felt a pang in his chest when Bian Lingbai said it aloud.

"—the Guardian has been lost," Bian Lingbai finished. "Unless last night's assassin was from Yuan? Hm…"

"How did the late emperor die? Who killed him?" Duan Ling asked.

"You don't know?" Bian Lingbai gave him a perplexed look.

Since he was already up and awake, Bian Lingbai ordered breakfast to be served. Seated together at the table, he and Duan Ling ate their rice porridge. Bian Lingbai had formed a good impression of this fake nephew of his. After all, the boy had traveled all the way to Tong Pass to meet him and resolved his debt crisis in one fell swoop. He'd bristled at the constant presence of Wu Du, but now that that eyesore was gone, he could have a genuine chat with the boy.

"The late emperor was a real man," Bian Lingbai said. "To save Yelü Dashi, he marched his forces all the way to Shangjing, only to fall into

Helan Jie's ambush and ultimately perish from exhaustion. In all my life, I've feared nothing and no one—except for him."

"Helan Jie is the one who…?"

"Mm-hmm." Bian Lingbai scanned the courtyard, somewhat forlorn. "It'll be the seventh day of the seventh month in seven days. Do you see? I took in that assassin because I've got no other way out at this point. If I don't strike the Mu family first, they'll come for me sooner or later."

The Mu family is coming for you as we speak, Duan Ling thought. *This guy is too slow on the uptake.* Despite his internal musings, he said, "You don't need to fear the prime minister, Uncle. Unearth the treasure and we'll have plenty of money. We won't need the court's salaries."

Bian Lingbai shook his head with a wry smile and chuckled quietly as he sipped his porridge.

"Why did Helan Jie kill the late emperor?" Duan Ling asked.

"Now that, I don't know. That guy is…"

Duan Ling tensed with anticipation.

But Bian Lingbai seemed to catch himself, reconsidering his words: "…a desperate man. After assassinating the late emperor, he fled to Western Liang. But they didn't dare shelter him, so he fled here to Tong Pass. Ay…"

Listening to his heavy sigh, Duan Ling almost sympathized with him. Though he wanted to press forward with more questions, delving too deeply might arouse Bian Lingbai's suspicions.

When they'd set aside their bowls, Bian Lingbai turned to Duan Ling. "Well, now that it's only the two of us left in the manor, go tidy up. I'll call you in a bit, and we'll go for a ride."

Assuming Bian Lingbai wanted to check whether his treasure had been disturbed, Duan Ling readily agreed. Just as he was about to leave the table, Bian Lingbai asked, "Do you have any other uncles?"

Duan Ling shook his head. "The whole Zhao family is gone."

"Then I'll be your real uncle from now on. We'll tell the others you're my elder brother's son, who came to Tong Pass to seek refuge with me."

While Duan Ling nodded gratefully, inwardly he thought, *My real uncle is in Xichuan. Careful: Once you're a ghost too, my grandpa'll beat the crap out of you.*

After staying up all night, Duan Ling could hardly keep his eyes open. The instant he returned to his room and lay down in bed, he passed out, dead to the world. Time passed unmarked as he slumbered, and somewhere deep in his dreams, the melody of "Joyful Reunion" echoed once again.

It was strange. Duan Ling had heard this tune played by four different people: Lang Junxia, Xunchun, Li Jianhong, and Wu Du. The two occasions it had resonated with him most deeply were his first day at Ming Academy and that final time in Xichuan. The entire world had seemed to hold its breath, the stillness breeding a quiet loneliness in Duan Ling's heart as he'd leaned against the door and listened to Wu Du play.

Lang Junxia.

The name made Duan Ling shudder whenever he remembered it. He refused to let himself think of that person's face—let alone his name. He rolled onto his side, unconsciously reaching out, but his hand didn't find Wu Du beside him. He opened his eyes. The flute's melody lingered in his ears as though it was real, but the moment he woke, the music had stopped.

Wu Du wasn't there.

It was the first time in all these months he'd been parted from Wu Du. Whenever Duan Ling was awake, whether Wu Du was training outside in the yard, watering the flowers in the garden, or tidying up the room, he was always there. But now, only an empty room greeted him when he opened his eyes. He found himself strangely unsettled as the sun's dying light filtered in.

Today was the first day. There were still six more to go.

Duan Ling sat up and stared blankly out into the courtyard. Autumn had arrived, bringing a somber desolation to Tong Pass as the first wave of yellow leaves crackled in the wind, skittering off their branches and drifting down onto the ground.

"Wu Du…" Duan Ling mumbled.

“What?” Wu Du replied out of nowhere, startling Duan Ling badly. He crouched, seated on his haunches, at the foot of the bed.

“You’re not gone yet?!” Duan Ling exclaimed.

“Shh.” Clad once more in his black clothes, Wu Du put a finger to his lips. His gaze swept over Duan Ling and darted around the room, alert.

“I couldn’t help worrying,” Wu Du said. “Why don’t we go together after all?”

“I can’t,” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du frowned. “It’s too dangerous here. I really can’t leave you behind.”

“If we both leave, then what about Bian Lingbai?”

“I mixed a dose of Seven-Day Mania into his porridge,” Wu Du replied. “It should cause him to have a seizure, foam at the mouth, and die bleeding from his seven orifices. If we head back to Xichuan now, we can still make it in time.”

“What if Prime Minister Mu has other plans?” Duan Ling asked. “Not to mention Helan Jie will be coming back.”

“And what if he finds you here and kills you?” Wu Du countered. “What will *I* do then?”

For some reason, Wu Du’s words made Duan Ling’s heart race. He knew Wu Du was genuinely weighing their options. Whenever Wu Du got serious, he became calm, displaying none of his usual impatience.

Brows knit in a slight frown, Wu Du continued, “The first thing I did when I left the hall was poison his porridge, then check if he’d eaten it. I was worried he’d come after you the second I was gone.”

“But look, I’m fine, aren’t I?” Duan Ling said. He turned his eyes toward the yard and asked, “Where did he head off to?”

“He’s talking to Mister Fei right now. He’ll be coming to fetch you soon,” Wu Du said.

“Do you still remember what the late emperor told you?” Duan Ling asked. “‘There are some things you must do, even if it means certain death.’”

Wu Du fell silent. His eyes were deep and beautiful, and his brows had taken on a slight arch as he gazed at Duan Ling. He chuckled. “You’ve got guts. But even the most careful man can make mistakes—you forgot something, did you realize that?”

“What?” Duan Ling asked, racking his brain.

“What will Bian Lingbai do if he realizes his secret ledger is missing?” Wu Du said.

Shocked, Duan Ling muttered, “You’re right, I messed up—I should’ve put a copy back in its place. It’s too late now, though. If he asks, we’ll just have to play dumb. Without solid evidence he’ll have to relent.”

“Mister Fei already forged one for you. I stuck it in the hidden chamber earlier this afternoon,” Wu Du said.

Oh, thank heavens! Duan Ling’s back was soaked in cold sweat.

“I was already out of the city when I remembered,” Wu Du added. “I turned back to deal with it—and to let you know.”

Wu Du stared pointedly at Duan Ling, and Duan Ling laughed.

“So…” Wu Du trailed off.

Duan Ling was sitting up in bed looking mildly dazed, dressed only in his snow-white underrobe and trousers.

Wu Du gave him another once-over before saying, “I’m off, then.”

“You… Be careful. Go safely,” Duan Ling said.

“I know you can use a bow. Run if there’s danger. Keep yourself safe,” Wu Du instructed him. “And you…be careful too.”

Wu Du was a tall man, but he crouched low as they stared at each other, the silence between them broken only by their soft breathing. Outside in the yard, a single leaf detached from its branch and fluttered through the air before alighting on the flower bushes. Disturbed by its landing, a nearby bee buzzed into flight.

Without another word, Wu Du hopped off the bed and dashed out the door. He hooked a hand on the eave and leapt up, vanishing over the rooftop.

Duan Ling sat at a bit of a loss, words long unspoken drawn from him by their parting. Memories of that other voice crashed over him like a tidal wave, bringing with them his once-endless sorrow—yet, like the tide, the waves that had surged into his heart also gently receded.

Chapter 75

“H*YAH!”*

Wu Du rode at a gallop, spurring his horse through the narrow mountain paths of the Tong Pass and into the plains as dusk fell. The road back to Xichuan was straightforward; it would take him two and a half days, and if all went smoothly, three days more to scale the mountains and hills again, returning to the Tong Pass.

The sinking sun dyed the land a deep red as it disappeared below the endless hills stretching to the horizon, where shadows intermingled and overlapped among the mountain range. Wu Du didn’t know when the change had started, but gradually, he’d found he no longer enjoyed the night. Every evening, as darkness descended, it carried with it a sense of desolation around the day’s impending end. He’d grown used to walking under the sun before he knew it, and now felt reluctant to return to the shadows.

A familiar voice seemed to ring in his ears: *You are an assassin. An assassin knows no day, only the night*.

He urged his horse onward in pursuit of the last streaks of light on the western horizon, rushing as though he could outrun the dark. He chased the waning rays until the sun sank beyond the mountains, leaving the sky overhead a brilliant shade of blue and plunging him into a tranquil, vibrant dream. He still remembered how he’d disliked the daytime when he was little. He’d only liked the night; he was safest when he was one with darkness. Yet somehow, things were different now. He would much rather stay in the light of day—it was livelier, more fun. When that brat woke up in the mornings, he would smile and chatter and bustle about, and the world would come alive with him.

And at night, once that brat fell asleep, it was as though Wu Du returned to his own world—a world that wasn’t filled with their conversations—to watch over that closed door until Duan Ling woke again, spoke with him again. Another day would pass, and they would go to bed, and the door would shut once more.

It was a cycle, reminiscent of a western clock he'd once seen in Zhao Kui's manor, some foreign country's tribute. When the clock's hands indicated a certain time, a little door would open, and a miniature figure would emerge to chirp *cuckoo-cuckoo*. Wu Du had found it hilarious the first time he saw it—but the figure only emerged on the designated hour. Whenever Wu Du passed by the room with the clock, he would stand still and wait for the little time-telling figure to come out.

Looking back on it now, Wu Du had to marvel. What a dismal life he'd led, that this was all the fun he had within it.

Overhead, the stars had emerged, the Big Dipper shimmering brightly in the autumn sky, pointing his way forward. In a few more days, it would be Qixi. How would he spend it this year? As usual, he probably wouldn't be able to get away from his responsibilities… Wu Du thought back. Since leaving his sect, he'd been alone—festivals ignored, New Year's disregarded. But this time, once the mission was over, he should be able to take a real break.

Wu Du couldn't figure that brat out. Since the first day the boy named Wang Shan had come into his life, it'd seemed he was hiding a deep, deep secret—like he wore a mask all the time. But when Wu Du thought about it carefully, Wang Shan had never really acted out of the ordinary. Sometimes he was as clever as a fox, and at others, he was completely oblivious. Wu Du honestly didn't know what to make of him…

A cool, refreshing breeze swept through the mountain paths on this tranquil night. The Black Turtle had risen overhead as well. Wu Du felt as if his horse's hooves had become light, and fallen leaves spiraled up around him, rustling, as he left them in the dust. He wound down the mountain road, setting a southwestward course and merging onto the official road that threaded through the mountains.

Duan Ling slept soundly, dead to the world until the next morning. Even after he woke, fatigue lingered on his face. A thick fog hung in the air, such that when Duan Ling emerged from his room, he could barely see past the tips of his fingers. He nearly called for Wu Du without thinking, but caught himself just in time—Wu Du had gone back to Xichuan. The steward came to fetch him shortly after, and he went to see Bian Lingbai.

Fei Hongde's broken leg was already on the mend, and the old man was waiting with Bian Lingbai for Duan Ling to join them for breakfast in the main hall, where several military officers were also present.

When Duan Ling arrived, Bian Lingbai gestured to the men with him. "You came so unexpectedly the other day that I haven't yet had the chance to introduce these gentlemen to you. They are deputy commanders of Tong Pass, from the same generation as me."

Duan Ling rose to make his greetings, but the officers were quick to humble themselves with a chorus of "Oh no, please," and "That's too great an honor."

Bian Lingbai introduced each officer in turn: two deputy commanders, two field captains, and a secretary. Among them, the deputy commanders surnamed Wang and Xie held the highest ranks. The secretary had limited authority, as Bian Lingbai preferred to consult with his advisor Fei Hongde on strategic measures and therefore kept the man away from internal affairs. Accordingly, the field captains and the secretary excused themselves before the meal began, leaving deputy commanders Wang and Xie as their sole company at the table.

Once the meal concluded, Bian Lingbai directed one of the deputy commanders to ready his troops for a march to the east side of Qin Ridge with him and Duan Ling, intending to inspect the treasure and ensure it remained secure.

The fortress at Tong Pass was set into the mountainside, with Xichuan to the south, Huaiyin and Shangzi to the east, and Western Liang to the north. This strategic location had been coveted since ancient times. As their party emerged from the pass, Duan Ling reined his horse to a halt before the towering mountains that stretched before him, the magnificent landscape filling his chest with a wild freedom.

Their horses trotted further up the hills, and their view expanded, revealing a vast sea of rolling clouds and wispy white mist cascading between the peaks of the mountains. In the distance, the Yellow River surged down its course—*peaks and ridges converging, tempestuous waves raging; the Tong Pass road lay, perilous and forbidding*.[21]

Bian Lingbai rode at a leisurely pace beside Duan Ling. "Rong-er."

“Yes, Uncle,” Duan Ling answered.

“You talk too little,” Bian Lingbai said. “You’re always so quiet. Sure, it makes you appear mature, but I can’t help you rise through the ranks if you don’t speak up.”

“You’re right to scold me, Uncle,” Duan Ling said. “I’ve always been this way at home, but I’ll try to speak up more in the future.”

“Your dad was a prudent man. Silence is golden, as they say—the more you say, the more mistakes you make,” Bian Lingbai said. “Tell me, what do you make of the current situation between the Liao Empire and Western Liang?”

If he was asking this, it seemed Bian Lingbai was ready to proceed with his rebellion. Bian Lingbai hadn’t purposefully concealed his intentions from Duan Ling, though considering the way he was only hinting at his designs without revealing the actual plan, it was clear he aimed to test Duan Ling’s loyalty.

“I’ll do whatever you ask me to, Uncle,” Duan Ling answered.

Not expecting such a forthright answer, Bian Lingbai burst into hearty laughter. Rarely did the foolish perceive their own foolishness, yet they were quick to guard against the overly clever around them. This, too, was something Li Jianhong had taught Duan Ling.

“I need you to do something for me,” Bian Lingbai said. “That Tangut prince seems to have taken a liking to you. Ask him for a rendezvous in the outskirts of the city; I’ve got plans for him there.”

Without the slightest hesitation, Duan Ling agreed. “Yes, Uncle.”

Bian Lingbai was perplexed by his lack of questions, but perhaps it was just as well. Blind obedience was exactly what he needed.

“But…” Duan Ling ventured after some thought, “I’m not sure it’ll work. What if he doesn’t want to come with me? And what if he gets… suspicious? What are we going to do with him?”

Bian Lingbai raised a brow. “Can’t you figure it out yourself?” When Duan Ling pressed his lips shut, he added, “Just spend some time getting friendly with him. If there’s anything you don’t understand, ask Mister Fei.”

Duan Ling nodded, though to himself he thought, *You're asking me to trade on my looks, aren't you?* But this too was just as well—he'd been wanting to have a private chat with Helian Bo anyway.

Upon their arrival at the small stream that had been the site of the ambush, the mist had largely dissipated, though dark clouds still loomed over Qin Ridge.

"It's somewhere near here," Duan Ling said.

But before Bian Lingbai could order a search, Duan Ling gave his sleeve a subtle tug. "Uncle, I've something to tell you."

As Bian Lingbai walked with Duan Ling a little way from the group, Duan Ling abruptly realized Fei Hongde hadn't joined them on this trip. He had to give it to the sly old fox—he must've guessed Duan Ling had found the entrance to the treasure trove, yet he'd remained silent on the matter.

Whispering into Bian Lingbai's ear, Duan Ling told him, "There's a place I suspect, but I haven't told anyone about it."

"Take me there now," Bian Lingbai said. He promptly ordered his subordinates to remain where they were and await his return, then turned to Duan Ling. "Can you use a blade?"

"I can use a bow," Duan Ling replied.

Bian Lingbai retrieved a bow and quiver, tossing them to Duan Ling along with a sword. Armed with his own blade, he gestured for Duan Ling to mount his horse. Duan Ling took the lead, and together they rode into a dense stretch of woods.

"Over here," Duan Ling said, coming to a stop by the cliff face. "I spotted the opening last time I was here, but I didn't tell Mister Fei."

He had merely meant to warn Bian Lingbai so he didn't let the secret slip, but Bian Lingbai misunderstood him. With an unthinking nod, he said, "Mm. Good boy."

Duan Ling was both baffled and amused.

Bian Lingbai dismounted with caution, and the two peered into the cave the assassin had passed by previously. A brisk, chilly breeze blew from within. Bian Lingbai approached the opening while Duan Ling nocked an arrow to his bowstring to cover their rear. He raised the bow and aimed,

but when he swung it to point toward the back of Bian Lingbai's neck, his hands trembled.

If he shot him now, it would all be over—but with the general's men all around, he also wouldn't be able to escape. It was better to wait patiently for Wu Du's return.

"Come on in," Bian Lingbai said from inside the cave.

Someone had left tracks around the cave; they led into the deepest recesses via a twisting, winding path. At the end was a spacious cavern, dropping abruptly off in an underground cliff. Duan Ling lit the candle he'd brought and gestured for Bian Lingbai to examine the precipice. Sure enough, there were more tracks along the edge.

"Uncle, we can't go any further," Duan Ling said.

Bian Lingbai appeared preoccupied, his expression flickering uncertainly.

"Look there. There's a rope." Duan Ling pointed further out.

Nodding distractedly, Bian Lingbai said, "Yes, it must be here. We'll get Mister Fei to divine a fortuitous day and unearth the treasure another time. Come on, let's go."

He stood protectively in front of Duan Ling, and just like that, Duan Ling's will to kill him wavered. This man intended to start a rebellion and kill Helian Bo—but he hadn't treated Duan Ling very badly at all.

Turning back, Bian Lingbai cast Duan Ling a strange, almost absent-minded glance. Head filled with thoughts of Wu Du, wondering when he would return, Duan Ling was caught completely off guard when Bian Lingbai suddenly swept his legs out from under him. Duan Ling tumbled over the edge of the cliff with a panicked shout.

Bian Lingbai watched him struggle to hold onto the ledge, only a trace of regret in his eyes. "Sorry, Rong-er. I've thought it over. It's best if as few people as possible know this secret. There's no one left in the Zhao family anyway; you can reunite with your dad down there. Let's leave it at that, shall we? I'll burn you some joss money."

With a final hard stomp, he crushed Duan Ling's hand under his boot. Duan Ling yelled furiously as he tumbled down the rock face.

On the evening of the third day, Wu Du entered Xichuan on a fast horse. Orders to relocate the capital had been issued, throwing the city into upheaval. In less than two weeks, the nation's great houses had begun to abandon this thousand-year-old city, sending chaos rippling through the streets.

"Where's the prime minister?" Wu Du asked as soon as he arrived at the residence, looking around for Mu Kuangda.

His eyes were bloodshot; he hadn't slept a wink since stealing the ledger, and it had been three days and nights since. He found the residence empty with hardly any souls about—the family might have already moved to Jiang Prefectural City. Wu Du bit back a curse, praying that wasn't the case. If he had to ride all the way to Jiang Prefectural City, he would never make it in time.

In the courtyard, Changliu-jun was kicking a shuttlecock back and forth with Mu Qing. The pair turned to look at Wu Du when he rushed in. While Changliu-jun glowered with his usual suspicion, Mu Qing was visibly surprised to see him.

"Wu Du? Where's Wang Shan? Where did you guys go?!"

Still catching his breath, Wu Du cupped his hands before him. "Urgent military intelligence. I request an audience with Prime Minister Mu."

"'Request an audience'?" Changliu-jun jeered. "It really must be urgent. Unluckily for you, Prime Minister Mu has already gone on ahead to Jiang Prefectural City."

Wu Du stared at him without a word.

Chapter 76

SLOWLY, WU DU DREW his sword. He warned, voice chilly, “Changliu-jun, I’ve got urgent business. Don’t make me fight you.”

Thinking Wu Du was joking, Mu Qing left the two men to it and wandered over to the side of the yard to kick his shuttlecock alone.

Expressionlessly, Changliu-jun unsheathed his own sword, ready for the standoff. Wu Du knew Mu Kuangda had to be in the residence. The man was too afraid to die—he would never depart for Jiang Prefectural City without Changliu-jun by his side.

Right on cue, Mu Kuangda’s voice rang out from the floor above. “What’s going on? Why are you back by yourself, Wu Du?”

The tension broken, Changliu-jun resheathed his sword. Wu Du kept his drawn, watching Changliu-jun with wary eyes. It wasn’t until Mu Kuangda came down himself and placed a hand over Wu Du’s wrist that he sheathed Flashblade.

Eyes still trained on Changliu-jun, Wu Du announced, “I have urgent news to report to you, Your Excellency.”

“Tell me upstairs,” Mu Kuangda replied, beckoning Wu Du to walk with him to the second floor.

The light in the room upstairs was hazy. Reeking of road-sweat, Wu Du removed his boots and entered.

“Wu-qing?” came Cai Yan’s surprised voice.

Never for a second had Wu Du expected the crown prince would be making a personal visit to the Mu residence. Instead of Lang Junxia, another attendant now sat beside Cai Yan.

“His Highness was just thinking of reaching out to you. We weren’t expecting you to come back to us instead,” Mu Kuangda said.

After bowing to Cai Yan, Wu Du turned a curious gaze to the man beside him. Surprise flickered through his eyes.

The man lounged against the table, drinking with a casual irreverence. He wore a military robe in dark red brocade; his left hand was adorned with a jade thumb ring accompanied by three more precious rings, while on his right, he wore a sheer glove. His eyes were hazy from drink. He belched, then raised his luminous goblet in an invitation for Wu Du to join him.

Frowning, Wu Du demanded, “What are you doing here?”

The man smirked. “His Majesty summoned me, so here I am. Is there a problem?”

Now it was Cai Yan’s turn to be surprised. “Zheng Yan, you two know each other?”

Zheng Yan shot Cai Yan a nonchalant glance and grunted an affirmative, then turned his eyes back on Wu Du with a lopsided smile.

“Save your catching up for later,” Mu Kuangda interjected. “Wu Du, what do you have to tell me?”

Wu Du pressed his lips shut, wary of speaking in the presence of guests. No doubt Changliu-jun had refused to announce his arrival earlier because the crown prince was here. Forgoing the details, Wu Du wordlessly took out a parcel wrapped in oilpaper and handed it to Mu Kuangda.

“Excellent,” Mu Kuangda said, delighted. He turned to Cai Yan. “News from Chang Pin. Please allow this humble subject to sort out the contents, Your Highness. I will make a copy for you afterward.”

“That will do nicely,” Cai Yan replied. “Since he’s here, I just so happen to have a small errand for Wu-qing.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Mu Kuangda said, stepping out to read Duan Ling’s letter in private. He closed the door behind him.

Silence descended over the room. Cai Yan was first to speak up with an assurance. “Zheng Yan is one of us.”

Wu Du made a shushing motion, signaling him not to reveal too much.

Cai Yan nodded. He thought briefly, then cut straight to the point: “Wuluohou Mu disappeared a month and a half ago. He didn’t even leave a letter of explanation.”

Zheng Yan snorted a laugh. “Capable men choose the right leader to serve. Don’t be too hung up on him, Your Highness.”

Anger flickered in Cai Yan’s eyes; he was clearly furious at Zheng Yan’s insubordination but powerless to act against him. Wu Du guessed at once that Zheng Yan had been sent on Li Yanqiu’s orders to replace Lang Junxia after the crown prince’s bodyguard had run off without a word. But this new bodyguard was heedless of Cai Yan’s rank and orders. Judging by Zheng Yan’s audacity in interrupting Cai Yan when he was speaking, Cai Yan had been enduring his company for some time.

“Wuluohou Mu first betrayed the late emperor, and now you, Your Highness,” Wu Du said. “He should be arrested.”

Cai Yan heaved a sigh and dismissed the idea with a wave. “It’s not that I blame him. But, well, not even Zheng-qing knows where he could’ve gone. Wu Du, if you…have any clues…”

“Just give it to him straight. Enough with this beating around the bush,” Zheng Yan interjected.

“Out!” Cai Yan barked in a rage.

Wu Du felt immensely awkward witnessing this interaction, but Zheng Yan wasn’t bothered in the slightest. Unabashed, he staggered out with his goblet and slammed the door shut behind him.

Cai Yan’s face was like rolling thunder.

“How can I be of assistance to you, Your Highness?” Wu Du asked, returning to the subject at hand.

After gathering himself, Cai Yan said, “I have come today not only to discuss the matter of the capital’s relocation with Prime Minister Mu, but also to ask you to search for Wuluohou Mu on my behalf.”

Wu Du went briefly silent, then nodded. “While the White Tiger Sect used to lead the Four Great Assassins, there aren’t many of us left in my generation. Wuluohou Mu is Xianbei, and everyone knows he slaughtered his own sect—I doubt he would listen to my commands. But if you give me the order, Your Highness, even if I can’t guarantee I’ll bring him back alive, I’ll at least bring back his body.”

Cai Yan fell quiet, his brow deeply furrowed as though he was making an extremely difficult decision. Finally, he said, “Do your best to bring him back alive.”

Wu Du nodded.

At that moment, Mu Kuangda knocked on the door and reentered the room. He said to Wu Du, “I believe I understand the situation. You must be exhausted from your journey—why not rest and have a meal to refresh yourself? I’ll need you to run another errand for me before dawn.”

Wu Du took this to mean that Mu Kuangda had a response regarding Tong Pass; most likely, he’d agreed to Duan Ling’s proposal. Wu Du bowed toward Cai Yan and took his leave while Mu Kuangda settled back down in front of the crown prince and rolled open a memorial to the throne.

By the time Wu Du left the prime minister, the sun was setting. As he walked down the corridor, he noticed a tipsy Zheng Yan talking to Mu Qing with a cup in hand, while Changliu-jun—sitting on the railing—watched him carefully, arms crossed before his chest.

Spotting Wu Du, Zheng Yan beckoned to him and began to approach. “Come, come, come! Drink a few jars with me. Let’s get hammered!”

Wu Du drew his sword and pointed it straight at Zheng Yan’s throat. “Master Wu’s going to bed,” he said coldly.

Zheng Yan conceded with a nod. “Drink with me when you’re up again.”

“We’ll see.”

Wu Du sheathed his sword. He tilted his head and sent a sideways glance at Changliu-jun, who acknowledged him with a derisive snort. Wu Du ignored him and hurried back to the remote courtyard where he and Duan Ling had made their home.

Nothing in their abode had been disturbed, but the flowers Duan Ling planted had wilted. Wu Du climbed into bed still wearing his dirty robes and passed out the second his head hit the pillow.

At Qin Ridge, Duan Ling dangled from the cliff’s face, an abyss yawning below. The second Bian Lingbai had swept his legs out from under

him, pure survival instinct kicked in. When Bian Lingbai next stomped on his scrabbling hands, he'd screamed and deliberately let himself fall while swiftly unslinging the bow on his back. In one lightning move, he hooked the string over a jutting rock and clutched the bow with white-knuckled hands. He kicked the cliff wall, dislodging a loose stone that tumbled down and hit the bottom far below with a faint *thud*.

Back soaked in sweat, Duan Ling clung to the cliff face and listened as Bian Lingbai's footsteps receded.

That was too close.

Just moments before, Bian Lingbai had been instructing him to lure Helian Bo out for a rendezvous in the city outskirts; he genuinely didn't seem to have planned on killing Duan Ling when they'd left Tong Pass. Only after they arrived had he resolved to kick Duan Ling over the edge of the cliff. The discovery of the treasure cave must've sparked the idea.

Duan Ling's original plan had counted on the fact that, once he disclosed the treasure's location, Bian Lingbai wouldn't be able to resist returning. When Wu Du came back, Duan Ling could have him either poison the cave itself or set his gold centipede on Bian Lingbai here. Bian Lingbai would fall mysteriously ill, with no evidence of foul play. Under the guise of helping him seek medical attention, Duan Ling could bring the incapacitated general back to Tong Pass, giving him the excuse he needed to assume temporary control of the garrison.

Yet for all his calculations, Duan Ling had never expected Bian Lingbai's thoughts to turn murderous the instant the treasure was within his grasp, especially when they were talking so amicably mere moments before. All considerations of how to lure out Helian Bo, or what he would do when Wu Du returned, had flown out of Bian Lingbai's mind; his singular impulse was to kill Duan Ling on the spot. This was not a logical development. Duan Ling had grown accustomed to dealing with smart people—he'd honest-to-goodness underestimated Bian Lingbai's level of stupidity.

Duan Ling dangled in the dark a while longer before attempting to edge to one side. He groped over the cliff face until he felt a protruding wooden dowel. It had been driven into the cliff wall and was barely long enough for a single person to stand on. Duan Ling grabbed hold and slowly

pulled himself onto it. Unsure how far Bian Lingbai had gone, he had no intentions of rashly climbing back to the top of the cliff right away.

If Bian Lingbai was reasonable, he would station guards at the cave's entrance. But reaching the guards waiting on the other side of the stream would take some time. If Duan Ling took this chance to slip out of the cave during this interlude, he might successfully escape. After a moment, he snuck over the cliff's edge and ran toward the cave mouth as silently as possible.

Yet just as he neared the entrance, he overheard Bian Lingbai's voice. "Keep a close watch on this place. Make sure no one goes inside…"

Duan Ling screeched to a halt and ducked back into the cave's depths as a chorus of footsteps reverberated through the chamber. In his hurry, his foot slipped on the damp rocks of the path, and he almost tumbled right back off the cliff. The close call left him shaken, drenched in another wash of cold sweat. Fortunately, the soldiers' footsteps stopped at the cave's entrance.

He crept back to the precipice and peered down, following the tracks he'd spotted earlier. Nothing waited down below save for the dowel that had saved his life. With no clear path forward and enemies behind, Duan Ling forced himself onward. Hooking the bow over a jagged rock at the cliff's edge for support, he tentatively put a foot down on the dowel and tapped it, finding it surprisingly sturdy. Assured that it would hold his weight, he fully stepped onto the dowel once again and looked down. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he spotted another dowel level with his own just a step away, nearly invisible in the darkness.

The dowels were set in such a hidden place that, had it not been for his fall, he would never have discovered them. When Duan Ling stepped gingerly onto the second dowel, he discovered more ahead: The bars formed a gallery road that led around to the left side of the cliff face, not toward the bottom as he'd previously assumed.

Step by step, Duan Ling followed the path to a raised platform over a hundred feet from where he'd initially fallen down. Water babbled nearby. The cavern was more spacious than he had first thought. He spotted a tunnel leading away from the platform, but as he walked toward it, his foot knocked into something that clattered on impact. He quickly moved to

steady whatever it was he'd kicked. He groped around in the dark and found a pile of half-burned firewood and crude oil.

In no time Duan Ling had lit himself a torch and held it up to survey his surroundings. The platform showed signs of recent habitation, as if someone had been here not long ago.

But who?

He thought of the mysterious assassin who'd attacked Fei Hongde. Was it him—and were he and the man who'd come to the governor's residence one and the same? If so, what was his objective? Duan Ling plunged into the tunnel and followed the path until it ended at a solid stone door. The lock had been broken in half by some sharp weapon and carelessly discarded on the ground.

Duan Ling pushed the door open. A hidden chamber spread before him lined with neat stacks of iron chests, several of their locks smashed and lids open. Duan Ling lit the fire pan inside the room. As the flames flickered to life, a dazzling golden glow filled the room, so brilliant he squinted his eyes against it.

Gold. The entire chamber must be filled with neatly stacked gold. Duan Ling selected one of the bars from the chest to inspect it, hardly believing his eyes. He began counting. If one bar was worth twenty taels, and each chest contained fifty bars, then the hidden chamber, with its fifty-six chests in total, contained a total of fifty-six thousand taels of gold!

Duan Ling nearly stopped breathing. Not even the National Treasury held so much.

And from what Duan Ling could see, gold might not be the most precious item contained within this room. A small rectangular hollow was recessed into the wall. Judging by the marks in the dust, it seemed something had been stored there—perhaps another item that had already been taken.

But what could be more precious than fifty-six thousand taels of gold? The print the item had left in the dust was only as wide as a palm. Duan Ling swiftly put together the facts: Firstly, someone had visited this place, and recently. Secondly, the visitor had no interest in the gold and took only one thing, perhaps the most important item, from the room. Was it the

unknown assassin? After some thought, Duan Ling deemed this a reasonable assumption. If he himself had stumbled into this chamber, he wouldn’t wish to carry gold bars around either.

Still thinking, he made his way out of the hidden chamber, closing the door behind him and returning to the platform to scout for another way out. To his surprise, he found a rope secured to the platform that dangled down the cliff face, trailing toward the ground below. After a moment of hesitation, Duan Ling climbed down the rope.

How had all those chests of gold bars been transported into the chamber via the precarious gallery path? This question stumped him. Halfway to the bottom, the rope came to an end, and another opening appeared before him on the cliff face—this one just big enough for one person to pass through. With his torch held aloft, Duan Ling continued onward. A brisk breeze blew through the cave, and as Duan Ling walked, the chamber suddenly opened up to light.

Day and night were indistinguishable within the cavern. Duan Ling was shocked to discover that night had fallen while he was inside, and that the light he’d spotted was that of the stars. He’d emerged at the summit of one of the valley’s low hills, an overgrowth of tangled trees and bushes spread before him. Ahead, a path was carved through brush leading to the mountain’s peak—presumably cut by the assassin with his sword—and thorns littered the ground. There was even a cut tree serving as a trail marker. Duan Ling enjoyed an easy trek to the top, where he stopped and stood beside a large tree scorched black by lightning. He extinguished his torch to avoid attention, and when he looked below, he realized he’d come to the end of Qin Ridge. Not far in the distance was Tong Pass.

It was the third day since Wu Du had left.

Chapter 77

BRIGHT STARS SHIMMERED in the black sky above Xichuan, a shadowed ghost town in the final days before the capital's relocation. The Liao Empire's southern invasion had led to a period of prosperity for the city never before seen in its thousand-year history. Yet only a year after the new emperor's accession to the throne, all that bustling activity sank into stillness, biding its time for a day when it might once again flare back to life.

Wu Du washed himself from head to toe by the well and changed into clean, fresh clothes. He sat down in the silent yard. Within moments, the stillness was broken by the faint sound of snoring from beyond the walls. He opened the gate and spotted the source of the noise—Zheng Yan, passed-out drunk—and dragged the man inside, where he dumped a bucket of cold water over his head.

Zheng Yan startled awake, then burst out laughing when he saw Wu Du standing over him.

The manor's servants had brought dinner while Wu Du was asleep, dropping the meal box on the veranda along with a note requesting he report to Mu Kuangda once he was awake. Wu Du plopped onto the steps and proceeded to wolf down his food, ignoring Zheng Yan completely.

Clothes in disarray, Zheng Yan sauntered over to sit on the veranda as well. He yawned, leaning back to gaze at the stars overhead. "I thought you were going to sleep till morning."

Wu Du rinsed his mouth with tea after cleaning the entire box. "I dreamed about a man from the past; it woke me up."

Zheng Yan gave his wine flask a testing shake and reached out to pour some into Wu Du's cup. Wu Du moved it out of reach. "Can't drink; I've got a mission."

"Life is but a fleeting dream; how brief our happy moments seem,"[22] Zheng Yan recited nonchalantly. "There's no time like the present. People come and people go; life is fleeting. Have a cup with me."

His words stirred something in Wu Du, and he placed his empty cup in front of Zheng Yan, who quickly filled it. Raising his flask, he clinked the rim lightly against Wu Du's cup.

"Life is but a fleeting dream; how brief our happy moments seem… Huh." Wu Du looked briefly pensive, then shook his head with a wry chuckle. He refused Zheng Yan's attempt to top up his cup and placed it upside down on the table. "I'll drink with you properly next time we meet in Jiang Prefectural City."

Zheng Yan shrugged off Wu Du's promise and poured himself another. "Who did you dream about?"

"The Guardian," Wu Du replied. "Everything changed in a single night. I still remember what he said back then: 'You turned Flashblade into a butcher's knife. When will you restore the glory of the White Tiger Sect?' It was like a bludgeon to the head." He paused. "But I never imagined that in one night he'd be gone, just like that. The times are changing as fast as turbulent waters; everyone's trying to ride out this maelstrom, apprehensive of what tomorrow may bring."

"It's almost the anniversary of the late emperor's death," Zheng Yan remarked with leisurely calm.

"The seventh day of the seventh month," Wu Du said, then sighed. "His Majesty chose Qixi as the date to move the capital. I wonder if the death anniversary informed his decision—paying respects before the move eastward; informing His Late Majesty's spirit so he won't lose his way home."

"His way home, eh?" Zheng Yan chuckled as he surveyed the courtyard. "It's been years since we last saw each other. I didn't expect you to take up gardening. Or does someone else live here too?"

"A kid I picked up."

"Well, where is he? Call him out here." Zheng Yan tapped the threshold with his flask.

"Don't get fresh with him, Zheng Yan, or I'll poison your wine," Wu Du warned with a chilly edge. When Zheng Yan stood as if to search inside, Wu Du snapped, "Did the booze go to your head already?! He's not here."

Zheng Yan relented, raising his hands.

Wu Du got to his feet. “You can stay here if you want; I’ll lend you the space. But I’ve got a mission, so I’m off.”

“Where? Where’re you off to?” Zheng Yan asked eagerly. “I’m *so bored* in the palace, an excursion sounds like a great idea—”

“Fuck off!” were the last words Wu Du hurled at him before vanishing from the courtyard.

The lamps were still lit within the prime minister’s study. As soon as Wu Du arrived at the door, Mu Kuangda’s voice rang out: “Don’t bother coming in. Accompany me to the palace.”

Wu Du frowned, puzzled. He followed as Changliu-jun escorted Mu Kuangda from the building and into the carriage in the backyard before settling himself in the driver’s seat. Mu Kuangda motioned Wu Du to join him inside.

“Don’t be so impatient,” Mu Kuangda chided upon seeing the look on his face. “One thing at a time. First: This is a letter for Wang Shan.” He handed Wu Du a thin envelope. “Handle the affair at Tong Pass as expediently as possible.”

A weight lifted from Wu Du’s mind, and he nodded in acknowledgment. Mu Kuangda took out a roll of golden brocade, sealed and knotted. “Second: An imperial decree appointing Mister Fei as acting imperial envoy. You can announce it publicly or privately; do as you see fit. After you depart tonight, the court will dispatch Zheng Li to Tong Pass to assume the position of governor, but his journey will take at least seven days—the road is rough, and he’s getting on in age; he can’t travel any faster. Before he arrives, you must work together with Wang Shan to hold Tong Pass.”

“I understand.” Wu Du packed away the items Mu Kuangda had handed him.

Before he could climb out of the carriage, however, Mu Kuangda pressed him back into his seat. “There’s a third thing. This I will tell you once we enter the palace.”

Though it was still the early hours before dawn, the palace was already brilliantly aglow with lamplight. At the palace stables, the hostler led out a striking steed, its coat obsidian black and hooves as white as if they'd been dipped in snow. The horse's eyes were ink-dark, and its mane blazed like fire. Wu Du paused in awe at the sight of the magnificent creature.

"No one has ridden this horse since the late emperor's passing," Mu Kuangda said in a low voice. "Wuluohou Mu brought him back, but he has since stopped obeying his commands. The crown prince has attempted to ride him on several occasions to no avail; Skychaser refuses to accept him."

"He won't listen to *anyone*?" Wu Du whispered back.

"He obeys His Majesty, but with his weak constitution, His Majesty rarely rides," Mu Kuangda said.

Wu Du approached with care, then reached out and cupped Skychaser's muzzle in his palm. Skychaser turned his head to gaze at him, eyes reflecting Wu Du's visage.

Cai Yan arrived at the stables moments later. He'd pasted a gentle smile on his face in an attempt to appear lively while greeting Wu Du despite the fact he'd been up all night. He was clearly worn out from the laborious affair of relocating the capital. "His temper has become quite violent since Father's passing," he said. "But you were the one who accompanied my father in his final days, and it shows; as I expected, he recognizes you."

"Wusun horses are famously proud. He'll calm eventually," Wu Du replied.

"It's been a pain trying to ride him," Cai Yan said. "It seems that, in all of Great Chen, he only recognizes Fourth Uncle. Anyone else who attempts to mount him will be thrown off. I'll tell you now, even though Wuluohou Mu was the one who rode him back, after Father's death, he stopped obeying him as well. The prime minister mentioned that you've been working night and day, Wu-qing, so I thought perhaps it would be best to give him to you."

Startled by the offer, Wu Du said in haste, "I couldn't possibly accept! The late emperor's beloved horse only recognizes the royal Li

family—”

Cai Yan waved away his protests. “All horses must run for their health,” he explained with a smile. “Fourth Uncle never enjoyed riding, and it’d be an insult to Skychaser to keep him in this confined space. Why don’t you give him a try—maybe he’ll heed you? If not, I’ve a few other ideas.”

Seeing Wu Du’s hesitation, Mu Kuangda added his voice as well: “His Highness is bestowing this fine steed upon you. At the very least, you must give him a try.”

This act of recognition from the crown prince was a reward for his wholehearted devotion to Southern Chen—a distinction he deserved. At that thought, Wu Du stepped into the stirrup and mounted Skychaser. The others quickly stepped back, the hostler moving to shield Cai Yan in case Skychaser went berserk again and charged him.

However, when Wu Du hopped onto Skychaser’s back, the horse was not irritated in the least. He simply stood there, quiet, allowing himself to be straddled.

Wu Du was shocked silent, as was the rest of the assembly.

“How strange,” Cai Yan remarked, his smile steady. He’d assumed it would take considerable effort to tame Skychaser, even if Wu Du somehow managed it—yet the horse remained calm and peaceful under his weight, not fighting him at all.

Wu Du, too, had been on guard after hearing how serious a challenge riding Skychaser had been, but he found no resistance to his commands. *“Hup!”* Wu Du nudged the horse forward. Skychaser trotted a circuit around the stable’s paddock. “Whoa!” Wu Du pulled the reins, and Skychaser stopped, turning his head to peer at their audience.

Wrapping the reins around his hand twice, Wu Du turned a confused gaze on Mu Kuangda, who looked toward Cai Yan. “I shall thank Your Highness for his generous reward on Wu Du’s behalf.”

Cai Yan returned an understanding smile, though he prickled with unease. No one had been able to ride this horse. Three months ago, he’d forcefully mounted Skychaser and ended up eating dirt, then nearly been stomped to death beneath his hooves. He’d been ready to kill the beast. Unfortunately, he couldn’t—Li Yanqiu loved this horse.

At least now the creature would be out of sight and out of mind. Gifting Skychaser to Wu Du killed two birds with one stone: It eliminated a threat to Cai Yan's legitimacy and cemented Wu Du's loyalty at the same time.

"Then I'll take my leave," Wu Du said, cupping his hands toward Cai Yan. He shot Mu Kuangda another look as he left the palace stables.

"Safe travels," Mu Kuangda said.

Wu Du nodded and galloped away from the palace on Skychaser's back with a cry.

Skychaser hadn't left the palace in a year. As soon as they exited the gates, he took off like a whirlwind—flying down Zhuque Street and then out of Xichuan, leaving the capital in the dust. What would've taken ordinary horses an hour, Skychaser managed in half the time.

"Hyah!" Wu Du urged, his mood taking flight alongside Skychaser's hooves.

The divine steed barreled onto the official road like a gale of wind, chasing the distant horizon. Wu Du bent low, the hems of his robes whipping in the breeze as Skychaser raced ahead, leaving mountains and rivers a blur behind them.

As dawn's first light glimmered on the horizon, the steed charged onto the winding mountain paths beneath rolling clouds edged in gold. The pair shot through valleys and across rivers as if they were level ground, galloping headlong toward the northwest.

The sun had risen over Tong Pass, spearing through the fog that lay low over the hills. Duan Ling had spent the night camped in the mountains. He washed his face, then gathered wild fruit and pilfered eggs from bird nests for breakfast. After orienting himself, he began his descent down Qin Ridge. While others might've lost their way in the mountains and been eaten by bears or died of hunger, Duan Ling was untroubled—survival in the wilderness was nothing new. He'd endured the harsh environment of the Xianbei Mountains after his escape from Shangjing; compared to that, the temperate climate and plentiful forests of Qin Ridge were a heaven.

He wondered how Bian Lingbai would explain his disappearance. Would he say he'd fallen down a cliff? Helian Bo would no doubt conduct a search in that case. Simply brushing off a suddenly missing person was impossible; Bian Lingbai probably wouldn't tell Fei Hongde the truth either. He'd most likely say he'd dispatched Duan Ling on some errand so no one would dare pry further.

At least, if he were Bian Lingbai, that was how he'd clean up in the aftermath—but that man wasn't one to follow obvious logic. Duan Ling couldn't trust too much in his own speculations, or he'd risk putting himself at a disadvantage again. His immediate priority was to try and warn Wu Du, due to return shortly, to be wary of Bian Lingbai lashing out in desperation if cornered. Helan Jie was still off pursuing the unknown assassin; as long as Duan Ling wasn't discovered by anyone else from the governor's residence, he shouldn't be in danger. Given this, Duan Ling decided to take the risk and reenter Tong Pass.

He entered the city gates by mixing in with the common folk, dodging guard patrols as he traversed the streets to avoid being questioned. Tong Pass had been constructed against a mountain, and the mazelike city was littered with narrow, stone-paved paths meandering up and down hills. Duan Ling wandered through alleyways at random. He felt around his pockets, thinking he should've known to take a gold bar with him. Thankfully, he still had a few pieces of silver, so he bought breakfast and wolfed it down.

Just as he was considering whether or not he should monitor the governor's residence, he spotted two people entering a tailor shop. Even at a glance, he recognized Yao Jing and darted into the alley to sneak in through the shop's back door.

"These throws are imported from Dashi," he could hear the lady shopkeeper telling Yao Jing. "Perfect for wrapping yourself up in the winter." While Yao Jing looked through the shawls, the shopkeeper added, "There's a large mirror in the back. Why don't you try it on, miss?"

"I'll be just a moment," Yao Jing said to the steward accompanying her and slipped into the back room.

The moment she entered, a hand covered her mouth, muffling her startled cry.

“It’s me,” Duan Ling whispered.

Yao Jing’s eyes widened in surprise. Duan Ling gestured for her to be silent, then dragged her into the back.

Chapter 78

"HAVE YOU SEEN Hel… He Mo?" Duan Ling asked.

"Didn't you leave on an errand?" Yao Jing sounded perplexed.

"Is that what my uncle said?" It was just as he'd anticipated.

Yao Jing studied Duan Ling for a moment and nodded.

"Where did he say I went?" Duan Ling asked.

Yao Jing wrinkled her brow. Duan Ling noticed his reflection in the mirror—he was a disheveled mess. No wonder he'd roused Yao Jing's suspicions. But as she was marrying either Helian Bo or Shang Leguan, she was the only person he could be sure wasn't working closely with Bian Lingbai. He decided to be frank with her: "Could you pass a message to He Mo for me? Tell him I'll be waiting for him at the bottom of Luoxia Hill, outside Tong Pass, at sunset."

"That Tangut young master went out this morning," Yao Jing said. "He took a bunch of men with him. General Bian was worried he'd renege on the wedding and asked him specifically. Uncle Deng told me."

Perplexed by this turn of events, Duan Ling asked, "And then what happened?"

"He said he was just going out on a hunt, that he felt stifled staying in the city. He wasn't sure when he'd return."

Duan Ling's heart sank. Had Helian Bo left the city of his own accord? If Bian Lingbai had attempted to dissuade him, then it wasn't likely he'd put his trap into action yet.

"Then… Can you speak with Mister Fei instead?" Duan Ling asked.

This certainly was possible. Yao Jing nodded, and Duan Ling entrusted her with a message.

The young lady departed, and before long, a familiar carriage rolled into the back alley. Fei Hongde peeled back the curtain and glanced outside, and Duan Ling quickly climbed in.

“I knew there was more to the story when that man came back on his own.” Fei Hongde had chills after listening to Duan Ling’s tale. He muttered, “Thank goodness heaven has eyes, and you didn’t die down there.”

As it turned out, Fei Hongde had suspected foul play the second Bian Lingbai returned without Zhao Rong. Before anyone could ask, Bian Lingbai had hastily explained that he’d sent his so-called nephew to deliver a message to Jiang Prefectural City to keep the imperial court at bay. But how was that remotely believable, when Bian Lingbai had left that morning without any notice, and had been lying to Fei Hongde about everything otherwise? His first guess was that Duan Ling had been murdered and his corpse left in the wilderness. Unsure what had motivated Bian Lingbai to dispose of him—whether the exposure of Duan Ling’s identity or something else—Fei Hongde had gone straight to Helian Bo to inform him Duan Ling was in danger.

Helian Bo’s immediate, extreme worry had proven to Fei Hongde that his relationship with Duan Ling was more than met the eye. But he wisely did not pry. With what men he had on hand, Helian Bo left the city to search for Duan Ling.

“I pointed him in the correct direction and told him to beware the guards Bian Lingbai stationed there,” Fei Hongde said.

“We can’t wait for Wu Du anymore. We have to act now,” Duan Ling declared.

Fei Hongde hesitated. “Executing the plan will be difficult with our strength alone. Shaoye, listen to my advice—”

“No,” Duan Ling said without thinking.

Fei Hongde’s brows pinched. He was briefly disgruntled by the frank rejection, but his displeasure bled away at Duan Ling’s next words: “I don’t want to wait around for someone else to come and help me anymore,” Duan Ling said with firm resolve. “Even if I were only defending an abandoned city, I can’t just sit here in agony without acting. Those who intend to save others must first be able to save themselves. I won’t let the same thing happen again…never.”

Duan Ling’s words shook Fei Hongde to the core.

Many times over, Duan Ling had remembered those final seven days in Shangjing. The person he was now would never merely wait in the city for his father's return—he would take up his bow and blade to fight his enemies alongside the soldiers before searching for his father himself. He had grown up.

But certain things, and certain people, were no longer waiting for him.

"I trust Wu Du," Duan Ling said. "I trust in his ability and in his heart. It isn't lack of trust that spurs me to act now, but that I must also do what I can."

Fei Hongde smiled at his declaration. "In that case, what do you propose, Shaoye? If you trust this old man, tell me your ideas, and we can discuss them."

"I think we should poison him and make his death appear to be the work of a venomous insect," Duan Ling said.

"Do you have the means?" Fei Hongde asked. When Duan Ling responded with a firm nod, Fei Hongde considered a moment. "Then perhaps it is doable."

They discussed the plan until they were satisfied, then split off to see to their own tasks. Duan Ling would locate Helian Bo, while Fei Hongde would return to the governor's residence hoping to lower Bian Lingbai's guard and lead him into carelessness. If they didn't act now, more variables might arise.

"An excellent plan," Fei Hongde commended him. "I will return at once to make the arrangements."

Duan Ling borrowed a horse from Fei Hongde and rushed out of the city in the last light of day.

Wu Du had traveled from the Xichuan road to the Tong Pass approach, covering nearly four hundred li in a day. Despite the relentless pace, Skychaser showed no hint of fatigue; if anything, he grew more energetic. Perhaps he'd been shut inside the palace stables too long.

Allowed his head, he raced freely with the spirit of an eagle soaring back into open skies.

If everything went smoothly, they would reach Tong Pass by tomorrow night. They were making good time; Wu Du stopped Skychaser at the bank of a river for a short rest.

“You’re a clever one,” Wu Du said to him, stroking the horse’s mane as he drank from the river. The water’s surface reflected their figures. “But why don’t you like the crown prince?”

The horse couldn’t answer his question. Skychaser turned away to graze the meadow.

“You know I’m off to save someone, don’t you?” Wu Du called after him.

Surprisingly Skychaser seemed to understand his urgency—maybe because, in his last moments with Li Jianhong, the horse had been pushed hard racing to Shangjing to save his little master. Yet as far as Wu Du knew, Skychaser had never met the young prince before Li Jianhong’s death; perhaps, the whole way back to Xichuan following the fall of Shangjing, this horse that was as smart as a person had never stopped thinking about the last mission Li Jianhong had entrusted him with.

He suddenly understood why Skychaser had rejected the crown prince. Fragmented memories of Li Jianhong must’ve remained with the horse, leaving behind the simple-minded belief that the one he was meant to rescue had not yet been saved. He’d temporarily obeyed Lang Junxia, but his time in the palace stables had been one of restlessness—to him, his little master wasn’t yet found. This must also be, Wu Du thought, why Skychaser allowed him to ride him. Wu Du felt a wash of guilt: At the end of the day, Wu Du was using this magnificent steed’s loyalty for his own ends.

“You’ve already saved the crown prince,” Wu Du murmured in his ear. “I’m off now to find someone else entirely. But even so—thank you.” Wu Du swung up astride the horse once again. “Let’s go! Shan-er will be immensely grateful to you too.”

Skychaser returned to the open road, doubling his speed as he raced toward Tong Pass beneath the starry canopy of the sky.

Duan Ling rode along Qin Ridge's mountain path. The air was muggy, and he was choked with agitation. He stopped and tethered his horse to a tree, then snuck quietly over to the spot where Fei Hongde had been ambushed. Across from the stream were the dense woods hiding the treasure cave. Almost twenty soldiers stood along the tree line, while still more were building a fire and boiling water on the opposite bank.

Where was Helian Bo? Duan Ling contemplated his next move as he scanned the area. If he were his friend, what would he do? Helian Bo knew Duan Ling had come upon danger here. Given his temperament, he would likely lurk nearby observing the enemy, waiting for the right moment to investigate. Nighttime was always best for an ambush—so when the night watch began to flag with fatigue, Helian Bo would surely make his move.

Rather than wait for him to kill the guards and storm the cave, Duan Ling would send him a signal. Having made his decision, he set fire to a pile of withered leaves by the river.

The riverbanks were littered with fallen autumn leaves, and the flame grew as it devoured them. The hungry fire spread rapidly, eating its way up the tree trunks after it consumed the leaves, then climbing upward to the foliage, setting the nearby trees alight. The flickering fire, brilliant and lively, brightened the area as if were a second sun.

"Fire!" cried the soldiers guarding the cave entrance.

They snatched up their waterskins and filled them at the river to douse the flames. While they were thus occupied, Duan Ling retreated on silent feet to the top of the hill, upwind. The breeze blew thick, roiling clouds of smoke toward the dense forest, and in no time, the guards were smoked out.

An arrow screamed down from on high and punched through a soldier putting out the fire.

"Ambush!" someone cried.

Duan Ling whipped his head around and looked along the trajectory of the arrow. He swiftly took his own bow from his back and returned the shot.

His arrow seemed to come out of nowhere, streaking into the far woods and nailing itself to a tree with a *thunk*. At the sound, Helian Bo

signaled his men to alertness. Through the dark, they saw a shadowy figure on horseback racing toward the stream, firing arrows into the legs of the soldiers rushing to extinguish the fire. The figure wheeled his horse around and charged back up the hill.

Duan Ling's heart was pounding. He'd taken a gamble—and the outcome proved he'd won his bet. The only other person who knew the exact location of the cave was Helian Bo; just as Duan Ling had wagered, he was lurking in the area.

As wind fanned the flames higher, one of Bian Lingbai's men charged toward him with a roar. Duan Ling yelled out in Tangut, *"It's me —!"*

Both sides were caught off guard, not anticipating an ambush. A volley of arrows rained down, whistling past Duan Ling's ears as he galloped up the hill. A fateful shot struck his horse, sending it buckling to the ground. Seeing Duan Ling about to tumble down the slope with his mount, Helian Bo spurred his own horse over. One hand firmly gripping the reins, he leapt from his horse and swung, skidding to a stop and catching Duan Ling's wrist to haul him into his arms.

"Go! We can't stay here!" Duan Ling shouted.

Helian Bo blew a loud whistle, then stepped back into the stirrups, pulling Duan Ling up with him. At his signal, the Tanguts retreated into the deep forest, disappearing from sight and leaving the ground strewn with Bian Lingbai's injured soldiers. The Tangut warhorses were all powerful steeds that had no trouble traversing forests. The instant they entered the trees, they were as good as gone. Duan Ling was drenched in cold sweat from the close call with his horse, but thankfully the peril had already passed.

"You! Almost! Scared me to death!" Helian Bo cried, directing his ire at the young man sitting behind him.

Duan Ling burst out laughing, and Helian Bo shot him a furious glare, raising his fist in a threatening gesture. Duan Ling patted his shoulder. "Gather your men."

As Helian Bo carried Duan Ling away from the treasure-cave hilltop, Duan Ling said, "Hey. Hey, Helian. You're not really mad, are you?"

They cantered into the shallow gully near a riverbank, where traces of a campfire remained. The second Helian Bo dismounted, he dragged Duan Ling off after him. It was thanks to Duan Ling's martial arts training that he didn't faceplant into the dirt, but no sooner had he gained his footing than Helian Bo pounced. Duan Ling sidestepped his assault and retreated a step, then mustered his strength and tackled him.

The two had barely escaped lethal danger, but here they were: wrestling in the dirt. As the Tangut soldiers rode into the gully one by one, they were stunned at the sight. Their surprise didn't last long—fired up by the sparring match, they dismounted and gathered in a loose circle, hooting and hollering as they watched their prince and the Han youth use fists to resolve their personal grudges.

Duan Ling butted his head against Helian Bo's chest, forcing him to take a staggering step back. He lifted his foot to avoid Duan Ling's sweeping kick, but Duan Ling was faster and swiftly leapt onto him. In one fluid motion, he swung himself around to straddle Helian Bo's shoulders and twisted his torso, throwing Helian Bo off-balance. When it came to wrestling, Helian Bo had been Duan Ling's first teacher. But Duan Ling had also learned the art of feinting from Li Jianhong, which allowed him to eventually become a solid match for Helian Bo back in Shangjing. After their year of separation, however, compounded by Duan Ling's lack of practice in the south, the match ended with Helian Bo on top, slamming Duan Ling to the ground and pinning him there.

Duan Ling yelped when his head knocked against a rounded pebble on the riverbank. Startled, Helian Bo pulled him up to check his forehead for injuries and spotted a rapidly swelling bump.

Duan Ling waved a hand, signaling that he was fine. The spectating Tanguts hadn't expected this Han youth to hold his own in a wrestling match with Helian Bo. As soon as the fight concluded, they broke into excited chatter and approached Duan Ling to give him a few hearty slaps on the shoulder. It was a worthy loss.

Helian Bo, on the other hand, was mortified. He'd only wanted to vent his frustration, but he'd injured Duan Ling. Duan Ling, exasperated, grumbled at him: "Got something to eat? I haven't had dinner yet; I'm starving."

Chapter 79

HELIAN BO IMMEDIATELY—and personally—set aside a portion of his party's rations to feed Duan Ling. Now that Duan Ling had been found, Shang Leguan ordered the men to patrol the area and prevent their discovery.

Duan Ling spoke between rapid bites. "Bian Lingbai's definitely gonna kill me…"

Helian Bo shushed him, gesturing for Duan Ling to focus on stuffing his face if he was so hungry. Duan Ling rummaged through the rations sack; the jerky he'd been gnawing was both tough and overly salty. Helian Bo broke him off pieces of cheese from his own meal, and Shang Leguan brought over a leftover roasted rabbit leg from dinner. It was just what Duan Ling needed.

Once his stomach was full, Duan Ling let out a long sigh and told Helian Bo, "I'm gonna go wash."

Helian Bo followed him to the river, and when Duan Ling beckoned him to join, the pair stripped down and jumped in together. Within moments they were splashing each other, wrestling and choking on water until they finally climbed ashore. After dressing again, they lay down side by side on the hilltop, gazing at the starlit night sky.

"O-one year!" Helian Bo said.

Duan Ling realized that, as of that day, it had been exactly one year since they parted.

"I-I'm sorry," Helian Bo added.

"Huh?" Duan Ling sat up, cross-legged, and looked at Helian Bo with confusion.

Guilty and anxious to express himself, Helian Bo stammered, "I-I-I shouldn't have tried to talk terms with you. N-n-no terms. I've done you wrong… I-it's my f-fault. D-Duan Ling, y-y-you're the only…f-friend I have left."

Duan Ling was utterly perplexed by this outburst.

“No trade; no need to,” Helian Bo continued, frowning deeply and slapping his own chest. The anxious lines of his furrowed brow conveyed more than his spoken words. “Brother, I-I will kill for you!”

Duan Ling had always been closer to Helian Bo than most. Back at Ming Academy, whenever Helian Bo had tried to speak, Huyan had always made fun of him, Batu had impatiently told him to shut his mouth, and Cai Yan’s expression had always been shaded with derision. Even the headmaster would merely offer a half-hearted nod to indicate he’d heard. Only Duan Ling had listened with any seriousness; only Duan Ling had understood him.

In his eagerness to speak, Helian Bo stopped worrying about choosing succinct wording to avoid his stammer and simply poured everything out. “I-i-is it because I-I didn’t immediately agree, th-th-that you went to do something d-dangerous? I-I-I was so worried…”

Finally, Duan Ling grasped the situation.

Bian Lingbai had returned with a man missing and had needed to provide an explanation; when Helian Bo asked him, he claimed to have dispatched Duan Ling on an errand. Yet very shortly thereafter, Fei Hongde had approached Helian Bo with a vaguely worded warning that Duan Ling had disappeared and might be in danger. He’d then suggested that he knew Bian Lingbai was colluding with Helian Bo’s uncle and handed Helian Bo a map, urging him to search for Duan Ling without delay.

This chain of events had led Helian Bo to believe that, after their negotiation ended inconclusively, with Duan Ling unable to produce any concrete terms for a trade, Duan Ling, out of desperation, had attempted to investigate the Western Liang army hiding on Qin Ridge himself. When Duan Ling disappeared, Helian Bo was racked with regret—this “trade” might have cost the life of his dear friend. What if Duan Ling had been attacked, or kidnapped? Clinging to a thread of hope, Helian Bo had searched the area laid out on Fei Hongde’s map, and thankfully, his efforts had borne fruit: Duan Ling had been found unharmed.

Of course, the swelling on his forehead from their wrestling match was a different story.

Helian Bo plowed ahead without waiting for Duan Ling to respond. “I-I-I will go back and find my uncle. Withdrawn! Th-the army will be w-withdrawn!”

Duan Ling waved his hands, motioning for Helian Bo to hear him out. Though puzzled, Helian Bo gave him his full attention.

“Where do I even begin?” Duan Ling sighed. He had so much to say he didn’t know where to start. Finally, he began, “My name isn’t actually Bian Rong. Or Zhao Rong, for that matter.” Helian Bo nodded, and Duan Ling added, “My name is Wang Shan, at least for now.”

Helian Bo stared blankly at him.

“Anyway”—Duan Ling waved a hand again—“my name is not important.”

Helian Bo nodded emphatically and patted Duan Ling firmly on the shoulder before yanking him hard into his arms and squeezing him in a tight hug. “Wh-wh-who you are i-isn’t i-important. Y-you are my b-b-b-best f-friend,” Helian Bo declared, undeterred by his stutter.

Duan Ling nearly broke into tears. *You Tangut barbarian, can’t you be more subtle like the Han instead of making people get all emotional like this?*

Helian Bo released Duan Ling and patted him again, gesturing for him to continue.

Faced with this declaration of friendship, Duan Ling contemplated for several moments, unable to decide whether or not to reveal his true identity. But what could Helian Bo do, even if he knew? Lend Duan Ling an army to help him reclaim his rightful place? Helian Bo himself was in a delicate position at home; if their two kingdoms were to clash in war, it’d be their innocent peoples and soldiers who’d suffer.

Besides, friendships shouldn’t be manipulated like that.

In the end, Duan Ling said, “I’m assisting Southern Chen’s prime minister. I came under the name Zhao Rong in order to infiltrate Bian Lingbai’s residence and collect evidence of his intent to rebel…”

Duan Ling proceeded to confess everything to Helian Bo, including what he knew about the army of twenty thousand lying in ambush at Tong

Pass, as well as Bian Lingbai's deal with Helian Da to dispatch Helian Bo on the border between their two nations. He even recounted to Helian Bo how Bian Lingbai had urged Helan Jie to return as soon as possible in order to carry out the assassination.

Though Helian Bo had matured considerably in the time they'd been apart, he was struggling to process everything he was learning. Dazed, he motioned for Duan Ling to give him a moment to digest it all.

"Wu Du went back to Xichuan to request an imperial edict," Duan Ling said. "Once we have the prime minister's approval, I'll give you the papers to bring back to Western Liang…"

"Wu Du." For some reason, within that deluge of information, Helian Bo had neglected all other details and honed in on this single name.

"Helian?" Duan Ling asked, exasperated. "Did you hear me?"

Helian Bo nodded, but gestured emphatically, as if nothing was more important than his next question: "Wh-wh-who is Wu Du to you?"

Duan Ling opened his mouth to explain that Wu Du was his friend in the same way Helian Bo was, then paused. That explanation didn't feel right. "He's my…" He trailed off, unsure how to answer. *Subordinate?* That wasn't right either. *Partner?* Even weirder. After some thought, the only apt description would be *family*, but as far as Helian Bo knew, Duan Ling didn't really have any. Besides, Helian Bo had seen Lang Junxia before and even come over for dinner in the past. Duan Ling didn't want to digress into this, nor explain why Lang Junxia wasn't with him anymore.

"Ah, in any case… Maybe just don't ask," Duan Ling answered clumsily.

"Oh?" Helian Bo said, then chuckled knowingly.

"What?!" Duan Ling exclaimed defensively. He immediately sensed the famed shamelessness of the Tanguts who, according to Wu Du, "even screwed horses." Incensed, he cried, "Hey, what are you thinking?!"

Helian Bo responded with a magnanimous wave. Only then did Duan Ling recall Helian Bo had yet to settle the score with Wu Du after Wu Du punched him. Clearly, all was forgiven.

Exhaustion crashed over Duan Ling; life had been so much more carefree when they were children. Allowing himself to relax into their easy companionship, Duan Ling lay down on the boulder with Helian Bo, side by side.

"He saved my life," Duan Ling said somewhat dazedly as he stared at the night sky. Dark clouds loomed overhead, obscuring the brilliant stars. He turned his head toward Helian Bo. "I don't know what he is to me. He's just—him. I guess he's just Wu Du."

"Mn."

"The reason I couldn't come to you before is that I've also kept some things from him. Every step in the Bian residence had to be carefully calculated—one wrong move and the whole game was lost. I'm sorry, Helian."

Helian Bo only chuckled again. "G-g-good you're a-alive."

Duan Ling had to admit that he thought the same.

Back at Tong Pass, Bian Lingbai had summoned Fei Hongde for an urgent meeting. Having long anticipated this request would come, Fei Hongde took his time appearing, arriving at the hall in an oversized night robe. After hearing his soldiers wail out their report on the nighttime ambush, Bian Lingbai was newly on edge.

Pacing back and forth in the main hall, he muttered anxiously, "We have to…immediately—"

"Calm yourself, General," Fei Hongde said. "An ambush that ends without a clear result is but a probe." He turned to the injured soldiers. "You are dismissed. Go see to your wounds."

The soldiers were carried out by their fellows. Fei Hongde closed the doors behind them before turning again to Bian Lingbai. "Aside from you, me, Young Master Zhao, and Wu Du, no one else knows what is buried within that cave."

"Yes… Yes, you're right." Bian Lingbai wiped sweat from his brow, realizing upon Fei Hongde's reminder that he'd become overwrought.

“Why did Wu Du leave?” Fei Hongde asked, though he already knew the answer.

“To search for the late emperor’s sword that was lost in the north, the Guardian of the Realm,” Bian Lingbai answered.

“I don’t imagine Wu Du is a man who’d commit treason and collude with the enemy,” Fei Hongde said, seemingly unbothered. “If he was, he wouldn’t have waited until today.”

“True.” Bian Lingbai couldn’t stand Wu Du, but he’d never heard of him shirking his duty to the nation. Yet at hearing the word *treason*, he became agitated once again.

“Young Master Zhao is still in his youth; it’s not impossible for him to have made a grave mistake,” Fei Hongde said, sounding genuine in his speculation.

“Impossible,” Bian Lingbai said, rejecting the idea outright. He’d kicked the brat off a cliff himself—he’d even heard a thud. How could the boy still be alive?

“If it wasn’t you who spoke, General, and it wasn’t me, then perhaps the assassin from the other night…” Bian Lingbai jolted, as if something had just occurred to him. Fei Hongde concluded, “From what I can guess, that man may very well have been sent by Helian Da.”

For a second, Bian Lingbai wondered with grave suspicion whether Fei Hongde had discovered his plans. But Fei Hongde shifted the topic almost immediately.

“Helian Da has been locked in a power struggle with Helian Bo and the queen dowager of the Tuyuhun tribe for some time,” he explained. “He must be planning to kill Shang Leguan and his party within Tong Pass, inciting enmity between our two nations. As for the assassin, it’s clear he’s been watching us closely. His suspicions were likely roused when Young Master Zhao and I went to Qin Ridge—it’s certainly plausible that he returned to investigate the area.”

“You’re right.” The murderous gleam in Bian Lingbai’s eyes disappeared as fast as it had arisen, though the thought of eliminating his too-knowledgeable advisor lingered. Truly, he couldn’t keep Fei Hongde much longer; the man was too smart for his own good. But Bian Lingbai

still needed him—for now. “Tell me, sir,” he asked, “what do you think our next move should be?”

“We needn’t worry. The sun is about to rise; even if the Tanguts found the treasure’s location, they wouldn’t know what was hidden there. You should dispatch another squad to guard the mountainside—try to station them beyond the Tanguts’ encirclement and order them to keep watch on their movements from behind. Once night falls, you and I will travel to the site ourselves. Bring all the men you’ll need. We’ll unearth the treasure tonight and transport it all out.”

Bian Lingbai considered the plan. It did indeed seem the best option left.

“Whoever ambushed your men knows there’s something suspicious about that area, but not what or why,” Fei Hongde consoled him. “As long as you don’t make a personal appearance, General, they won’t know the significance of what our men are guarding. Without any concrete information, all they can do is probe. Before you go yourself, we’ll make all necessary arrangements to prevent any mishaps.”

“At this point, that’s all we can do,” Bian Lingbai agreed.

Taking his leave, Bian Lingbai hurried off to make preparations. He would send guards into the forested section east of Qin Ridge and have them take up key positions on high ground: From there, they could monitor the Tanguts’ every move.

Duan Ling was lying on his side on the boulder, asleep, when the sky began to lighten. The voices of men making reports to Helian Bo roused him. Listening groggily, he learned that Bian Lingbai had sent troops to fortify the surrounding area, but the general himself hadn’t appeared. It seemed his and Fei Hongde’s plan had worked.

It was the fourth day since Wu Du had departed. By now, Duan Ling estimated, he should’ve obtained what he needed in Xichuan and begun his return journey. “Bian Lingbai will come tonight,” he told Helian Bo. “Let’s go—have your people follow me to the adjacent hilltop. Leave a few men here to patrol the area and keep watch for any movement.”

Helian Bo and his scouts confirmed their method of communication: fire signals. If Bian Lingbai's troops began to move, the men at their current position would light a torch, which should be visible from the opposite hillside. Duan Ling and Helian Bo would head for the treasure cave; a sentry would be stationed at the entrance and would report inside the moment he saw the signal.

"Th-these are the finest warriors of Western Liang," Helian Bo explained to Duan Ling.

Much like the Four Great Assassins of Southern Chen, Western Liang maintained a special unit of elite soldiers. This personal guard had existed since the founding of the Tangut empire.

Duan Ling was filled with mixed emotions. Helian Bo slapped his own chest again with confidence, reassuring him that he needn't worry: Even if Bian Lingbai and Helian Da plotted to kill him, he would escape—even from a battalion of thousands.

Chapter 80

DUAN LING LED HELIAN BO and his men into the dense woods. After locating the trail he'd left, Duan Ling parted the tall grass to reveal the cave entrance leading to the hidden treasure. Just inside the cave mouth was a sheer cliff. The guards lowered ropes down into the abyss, but when Duan Ling tried to lead the way, Helian Bo pulled him back and sent a scout ahead instead.

Only once the man reported no danger from below did the rest of the party climb down. Navigating the path Duan Ling had discovered before took some time, but eventually their party reached the door of the treasure chamber.

Helian Bo was dumbfounded by the sight—never had he seen so much gold.

"Th-th-this—"

"Shh," Duan Ling hushed him. "You want some? Just take it. Maybe you've no use for the gold, but you could give some to your men."

Duan Ling knew Helian Bo would never take something that didn't belong to him, but it'd be nothing for him to give some gold bars to his hardworking guards. He turned to Helian Bo's men and announced, "These are all mine, so take as many as you like."

It wasn't a lie; this treasure belonged to him by right. Not a single coin had ended up in his pockets after the Zhao family's possessions were confiscated by the government, and he'd been forced to rely on Helian Bo's succor; this had frustrated Duan Ling to no end. He took up a gold bar, tapped on it, then tossed some to the guards. Everyone received a few as a reward, and Duan Ling himself pocketed a couple for when he might need money in the future.

He'd taken nothing last time he was here and almost hadn't been able to afford his breakfast.

Helian Bo gestured that there was still time, so Duan Ling should rest. Duan Ling nodded and led everyone back to the platform, while Helian

Bo left to make arrangements for ambushing Bian Lingbai.

With Helian Bo around, everything was safer. Duan Ling's initial plan had been to hide behind the treasure chests and unleash the centipede at the moment Bian Lingbai pried one of them open. He would then carry the poisoned general out of the cave, calling for help. Explaining his reappearance would be easy: He'd simply say General Bian had tasked him with a secret mission guarding the treasure. With Fei Hongde to corroborate the story, no one would suspect anything untoward.

But now that Helian Bo was helping, Duan Ling's chances at success had significantly increased. The Tangut guards could ambush Bian Lingbai directly, and Helan Jie wasn't around to cause problems. Greedy bastard that he was, Bian Lingbai surely wouldn't bring more than a few trusted men. All Duan Ling needed to do was capture his party and force Bian Lingbai to reveal the mastermind behind Helan Jie to everyone—it was a much more effective plan.

Duan Ling anticipated the moment with nervous excitement.

After the short break, Helian Bo scattered his men. The agile guards cast grappling hooks into the stalactites overhanging the cliff and breezily swung to the other side. Crawling beneath a blindage in the cliff walls, they settled in and readied their bows, arrows trained on the platform.

With everything thus in place, Helian Bo scaled the cave wall to a rocky outcropping high up near the ceiling and hid himself in the shadows. He whistled to Duan Ling on the platform, signaling that they were ready. Only the steady drip of water rolling down the stalactites could be heard within the subterranean cavern. A deep chasm bracketed by cliffs as sharp as knives cleaved through the cave, sinking into infinite darkness. Waiting higher on the cliff face were the spacious platform and the tunnel leading to the treasure chamber.

Helian Bo and his guards arrayed themselves across both walls of the cave, so that the range of their arrows covered the entirety of the platform. Once Bian Lingbai made his way over on the gallery path, the arrows would claim the lives of his subordinates, then pin him in place.

Duan Ling heard Helian Bo's whistle as he reentered the tunnel—their usual signal back when they'd snuck around as boys. As he stepped back into the depths of the treasure chamber and looked around, he noticed

something odd. A fresh set of footprints crossed in front of the hollow that had stored the missing item he'd noticed his first time here, where he'd been standing just minutes ago.

The hair on his arms rose. What was going on?! When he and Helian Bo had come in to check on the gold, no one had noticed these footprints. Had someone else come since then? He examined the room; he was sure he was the only one inside. But he was equally certain those footprints weren't there the first time he came in—which meant someone had come after they'd left. It had to be the same person who'd taken refuge here before. Tense with nerves, Duan Ling tentatively approached and compared the size of the footprints: a size larger than his own boots. His breath hitched. Someone had come in and stood in this exact spot, scrutinizing the room.

In the darkness behind him, a glinting hook creeped toward his neck.

Wu Du reached the wheat fields where he and Duan Ling had stopped previously around sunset. Finally too fatigued to go on, he tethered Skychaser to a tree and sat down, passing out almost instantly with his head lolled to the side. Skychaser knelt beside him and grazed.

His short, four-hour nap was riddled with strange dreams. He dreamed of himself in Qunfang Pavilion, and of the brat, arms circled around his neck, whispering in his ear.

"Wh… Huh?" Wu Du woke bleary and unsettled. Ruffled by the dream and annoyed at himself, he scrubbed his face clean at a nearby pond and continued on his way.

He would reach Tong Pass within two hours. At last—he'd made it in time.

By the time Duan Ling sensed the hook it was too late. The instant he opened his mouth to scream, the hook tightened around his neck, killing his cry in his throat. He was dragged backward down the tunnel in a blur, the chamber's ceiling rapidly receding from view as he and his attacker burst onto the platform.

This development had come too suddenly; Helian Bo let out an angry bellow, alerting the guards to the danger in their midst. Yet even as he raised a hand to signal the archers, Helan Jie lifted Duan Ling in front of him as a shield. No one dared fire.

Grasping Duan Ling in his damaged left hand, Helan Jie hopped from dowel to dowel, fleeing via the pathway Duan Ling had taken the first time he'd entered the cave. Unable to catch up with him, Helian Bo whistled to signal the sentries and alert the men outside the cave's entrance.

How can he be here?! was Duan Ling's first panicked thought.

The whole plan's ruined! was his second.

The moment Helan Jie stole out of the cave's entrance, a soldier yelled, "Who goes there?!"

Helan Jie punched Duan Ling in the gut and tapped an acupoint; Duan Ling's vision instantly went dark, his body limp and unable to struggle. Spinning, the assassin shouldered the soldier aside so hard he smashed the man's head against the cave, cracking his skull. A volley of arrows followed; Bian Lingbai's soldiers, guarding the cave's entrance, had no qualms about taking Duan Ling's life. Fortunately, Helan Jie was quick to make his escape. He dove into the woods and leapt across the wide stream, stumbling only slightly as he disappeared into the twilight with Duan Ling in tow.

Slack in Helan Jie's hold, Duan Ling knocked into trees and boulders as Helan Jie scaled the mountain, climbing until they reached a perilous peak near the end of the mountain road. Just before the summit was a towering outcrop, home to a lone pine tree that leaned out over the drop. Helan Jie whipped out a rope and bound Duan Ling's wrists, then threw Duan Ling out over the cliff. A million miles of vast sky filled Duan Ling's field of vision; if Helan Jie let go of the rope, Duan Ling would plunge to a gory death.

But he didn't fall. Helan Jie secured the other end of the rope to the furthest branch of the leaning pine. Dangling in midair with his hands bound, Duan Ling swung suspended between the sky above and the earth below.

As he hung there, panting, the world seemed to fall silent around him. The rope tethering him to the pine tree spun slowly, twirling him around until he was sick.

“A surprising catch,” Helan Jie cackled, pulling down his mask. His face was pockmarked and covered in scars. When he smiled, the sight was as terrifying as any ghost in the night. An owl hooted nearby.

Duan Ling shouted as he struggled, “Why… Why were you even there? Let me go!”

Helan Jie stared at Duan Ling with unblinking eyes. “I was lying in wait for my enemy. But I caught you instead. Lucky me.”

Still gasping for breath, Duan Ling asked, “How long were you waiting in that cave?”

“I just got there.”

“But who were you trying to catch? What do you have against Wu Du?!” Duan Ling found himself growling.

“Ah—Wu Du. I forgot about him,” Helan Jie muttered. “Who are *you*?”

Duan Ling stared at Helan Jie, who stared right back. With an apelike agility, Helan Jie leapt onto the pine tree, causing it to dip perilously. Duan Ling bit down on a scream.

Standing atop the branch, Helan Jie flashed his iron hook at Duan Ling. “You know the Nameless Assassin? I’ll make him pay for the loss of my hand.”

“Who?” Duan Ling said with a frown. He’d never heard of any Nameless Assassin. No matter how he racked his brain, he couldn’t understand why Helan Jie had appeared inside the treasure cave.

Helan Jie snorted, settling cross-legged on the branch. Straining under their weight, the tree bent in a creaking arc. Duan Ling cast his eyes up to the twinkling stars above. This man had murdered his father, and now he was about to kill him too. Beneath this wide and empty sky, could he still say, *May heaven bless our Great Chen?*

Wu Du was surely galloping toward him even now—but whether Helan Jie’s enemy showed up or not, this madman wouldn’t spare Duan

Ling's life.

"What's the use of taking me hostage?" Duan Ling asked. "I don't know any Nameless Assassin."

Helan Jie sneered down at him. "Stop lying. You think I don't know? The bandits Helian Da sent—it was the Nameless Assassin who killed their sentry in the woods that day. He saved your life. How could there be nothing between you?"

"What?" Duan Ling's brows knitted.

"Sneaking into the general's residence at night for an assassination attempt must've been for you too. It took a lot for me to find his trail, but who would have thought: His hiding place was the same treasure cave Bian Lingbai's been looking for."

Duan Ling didn't know what to say.

"I worried that if Bian Lingbai came here, he'd scare him off—but with so much gold here, there's no way the Nameless Assassin wouldn't return… Who would've thought that, after waiting for days, it would be *you* who showed up instead!"

"He probably just wanted whatever was in that hole in the wall," Duan Ling said. "Save your energy; he's long gone. Why wait around here for him?"

"We'll see about that," Helan Jie said. "If he doesn't show soon, you're dead."

"Well, at least send him a message," Duan Ling snapped back. "I'd like to be saved. There is no grievance between us; I'd rather not die for no reason."

Helan Jie sneered again. "There are plenty of people out there I've got no grievance with, yet I've taken eight thousand lives, if not ten. What's one more? I can wait until dawn to chase him to the ends of the earth and kill him—after you die, that is."

Chapter 81

“HE’S NOT COMING,” Duan Ling said.

Helan Jie fell silent, studying him as he hung there limply.

Duan Ling turned his gaze back to the brilliant stars above. He muttered, almost to himself, “I know he’s not.”

“I knew it. You *do* know him,” Helan Jie said.

“Once I’m dead, give something of mine to him. It’s in my robes,” Duan Ling said.

Helan Jie frowned, skeptical.

Though he was trying to appear guileless, the truth was Duan Ling had no idea who this Nameless Assassin was. His only thought was to trick Helan Jie into touching the golden centipede in his robes. One venomous bite from the creature and Helan Jie would be done for; Duan Ling would be saved.

Sure enough, Helan Jie bought his lie. The assassin slowly eased his way down the branch toward Duan Ling. Yet just as he neared the tip, he seemed to change his mind and drew back.

“What’s wrong?” Duan Ling asked.

Helan Jie snorted. “I nearly fell for it. If you’re Wu Du’s little lackey, you’re sure to carry some sort of device.”

Why are you so smart? Duan Ling grumbled to himself. Yet as he turned his head, ready to attempt further persuasion, he saw that a man in black wielding a glinting longsword had appeared soundlessly behind Helan Jie, blade pointed at his back.

Gaze locked on Duan Ling, Helan Jie edged backward toward the cliff, delivering himself, inch by inch, to the sharp tip of that sword. Duan Ling’s heart thundered in his chest. *Is that the Nameless Assassin? Strike—strike now!*

Helan Jie opened his mouth; before he could utter a word, the Nameless Assassin lunged, fast as lightning.

The longsword was a flash reflecting the wintry starlight above as it streaked toward Helan Jie's back, only to flex into an arc as it failed to penetrate. Roaring in anger, Helan Jie whirled around and slashed his hook across the Nameless Assassin's body, opening a gash from the man's abdomen up to his chest. Blood sprayed through the air. Without missing a beat, Helan Jie leapt from the branch onto the main body of the pine and slashed at the Nameless Assassin again.

Though his ambush had failed, the Nameless Assassin swiftly recovered and lunged again with three feints targeting Helan Jie's throat, heart, and waist. Helan Jie flipped backward, narrowly dodging the blade aiming for his throat. Duan Ling heard the faint clink of metal on metal.

The strike had missed Helan Jie's neck, but in his next thrust, the Nameless Assassin's sword swept across his torso and tore open his robes, revealing a flexible chainmail armor underneath. Helan Jie's hook lashed out again and caught the Nameless Assassin across the arm. Blood ran from the deep gouge and splattered across the branches.

Praying with all his might for the Nameless Assassin to win, Duan Ling took advantage of his captor's distraction to attempt to save himself. He swung his body back and forth, trying to generate enough momentum to flip up into the pine tree and catch the branch between his legs.

But before he could get a foot over, Helan Jie sprang back onto the branch. It jolted and bent under his weight, knocking Duan Ling off and leaving him once again twirling in the air. The Nameless Assassin closed the gap in a single bound and exchanged several more rapid blows with Helan Jie, their swords screaming against each other. Helan Jie was first to break away, dropping back to the ground in an effort to keep distance between them, but the Nameless Assassin was right on his heels, landing softly at the pine's base. The already precariously leaning tree couldn't take the abuse; clumps of soil crumbled away from the roots as they clung to the cliff's edge, threatening to give way at any moment.

Helan Jie hopped back up into the tree's branches, his face splitting in a sinister smile. "Come, what are you afraid of? Who is this brat to you?"

The trunk of the pine was beginning to crack. Duan Ling twisted in midair. Each time he nearly managed to hook his foot onto the branch, he was thrown off as the branch shook under the assassins' back and forth.

Putrid blood rolled down the Nameless Assassin's face—Helan Jie's hook had been coated with poison. The man was visibly slowing; his failure on the first attack had lost him the initiative, and now he was poisoned. Yet despite the blood running from his many wounds, he didn't retreat, instead using what remained of his strength to leap up into the tree and strike with his sword.

The pine's trunk creaked ominously. At the sound of the wood snapping, Helan Jie somersaulted over the Nameless Assassin's head. The second his feet touched the ground, he delivered a hard kick to the trunk. Duan Ling screamed. The Nameless Assassin whirled and barreled toward Helan Jie like a raging tempest with no regard for his own life.

Please don't die! Duan Ling thought desperately as he finally caught hold of the branch and hauled himself up. He frantically untied the end of the rope tethered to the tree. The pine was ready to topple over the cliff at any moment; a debris of dirt and rocks broke from the cliff's edge and tumbled down into what appeared to be an infinite abyss below.

Continuing his relentless pursuit, the Nameless Assassin bounded across the rocky outcrop and met Helan Jie's hook with his sword. Sparks flew from the scraping of metal against metal. His brutal strength forced Helan Jie back, every blow striking at the man's vitals. Eyes bloodshot from rage, Helan Jie ignored the blade and threw himself bodily at the Nameless Assassin. His hook swung up and stabbed through his free hand.

The Nameless Assassin grunted from the impact but used their combined momentum to slam Helan Jie against the rock wall. Lashing out again, Helan Jie caught him by the back of his collar and dragged him down with him. Both men crashed back to lower ground. The Nameless Assassin, having lost his grip on his sword in the scuffle, grabbed a rock and smashed it against Helan Jie's temple. Blood bloomed across his face. Mad as a cornered beast, Helan Jie slammed his head into the Nameless Assassin's forehead with all his strength; it was impossible to tell whose blood was whose.

As Duan Ling inched his way down the tree, he saw the Nameless Assassin tilting his head in his direction—but before the man could turn to face him, Helan Jie had locked his hook around his throat. Arduously, the Nameless Assassin resisted the hook to gaze at Duan Ling. His eyes were filled with desperate worry, as if pleading for him to hurry and run away.

For a moment, Duan Ling's heart stopped—then he sprinted full tilt across the snapping pine toward the cliff. Helan Jie immediately let go of the Nameless Assassin and aimed a whirling kick at Duan Ling, determined to kill him in front of this man.

Duan Ling only had one foot on solid ground when Helan Jie's boot struck him square in the chest and sent him flying back into the tree dangling over the abyss. The impact snapped the pine at last. The tree plunged downward, its roots tearing mossy rocks from the cliff as it dragged Duan Ling down with it.

Duan Ling heard himself scream.

In that split second between life and death, Duan Ling heard the whinnying of a warhorse. A steed he couldn't have been more familiar with seemed to swoop down from the brilliant Milky Way, rushing toward him carrying the stars on its back.

Skychaser!

"Dad," Duan Ling breathed. He opened his arms wide as he plunged through the air. *It's finally over.*

Skychaser rammed into Helan Jie and sent him flying, while the tall man astride him launched himself from the stirrups toward the falling Duan Ling as if he intended to die with him. Sweeping an arm around Duan Ling's waist as they plummeted, Wu Du yanked him hard against his body.

"Don't move!" he shouted.

With Duan Ling secure in his arms, he twisted in midair and planted his feet on the falling pine, then leapt lightly off the tree. His first bound propelled them upward; he pushed off a falling rock as it tumbled past, taking them up again. This was a qinggong technique called Climbing the Heavenly Ladder. Duan Ling's eyes widened, his pupils contracting—it felt as if they were in flight beside the cliff face, walking on air a million feet above the ground.

With his final step, Wu Du touched down on another free-falling rock and pushed his toe against it, setting the rock spinning like a wheel. Borrowing the momentum of its rotation, he exerted every ounce of strength he'd cultivated in his life to kick off once more. He flipped through the air with Duan Ling still in his arms, their sleeves flaring, and landed at last on the solid earth at the top of the cliff.

The second Wu Du's feet touched the ground, Helan Jie shook out a barrage of needles concealed within his damaged hand. Yanking Duan Ling behind him, Wu Du whipped out Flashblade with his right hand to cut the rope binding Duan Ling's wrists while flipping his left palm outward to reveal the magnetic disc on his palm to the rain of steel needles. Metal clinked against metal as Helan Jie's needles were sucked in.

"Release!" Wu Du bellowed.

The needles shot back at Helan Jie, catching in the fine chainmail without reaching his body. Forced on the back foot, Helan Jie ducked into the woods to make his escape.

Duan Ling was panting, trying to catch his breath; Wu Du, nerves strained taut, gazed in the direction Helan Jie had fled. It was silent for a slow breath before Wu Du finally turned around to gaze at Duan Ling. Their eyes locked. Neither spoke.

Wu Du grabbed Duan Ling's arms and dragged him into a fierce hug.

The pair engulfed one another in a firm embrace upon the cliff's precipice. Resting his head on Wu Du's shoulder, Duan Ling once again heard his heartbeat. That strong, steady beat reminded him of the countless nights he'd spent falling asleep safely held in his father's arms. He recalled the gentle rise and fall of Li Jianhong's chest as he breathed; the ground rumbling beneath them as mighty armies marched outside Shangjing; riding with him together across the vast grasslands that the wild geese called home to the thunder of beating drums in the distance.

Hearing this sound, it was as if Li Jianhong still lived, was still standing in front of him. He was him, but also not. Duan Ling glanced up, feeling for a brief moment as though he saw his father's face. But the one holding him was Wu Du—this man who had also unconditionally protected him without reason, and at all costs.

If my dad were still alive, he would be grateful to you, Duan Ling thought. His lips parted, but no words emerged.

Silently, Wu Du brushed Duan Ling's cheek with his thumb; he was flustered and at a loss. He wanted to speak, but Duan Ling simply tightened his arms around him and buried his head deeper into his shoulder.

"All right…" Wu Du soothed him awkwardly. "There are people watching… There are—who's there?!"

Duan Ling abruptly remembered the other man and spun around. But the rocky hills were empty. The Nameless Assassin from earlier had vanished without a trace.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Joyful Reunion
VOLUME 3

Character Guide and Glossary

Character and Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Joyful Reunion takes place in a fictional historical setting. It takes inspiration from empires such as the Liao dynasty (916–1125 AD), the Mongol horde prior to the establishment of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 AD), and the Chen dynasty (557–589 AD); and from peoples such as the Xianbei and the Tangut, who existed throughout Chinese history.

As such, many of the characters in Joyful Reunion are fictionalized versions of historical figures, including the Yelü imperial family of Liao, Kublai Khan, Ögedei, and Borjigin Batu. Other characters, such as the four great assassins and the Li imperial family of Southern Chen, are created for the sake of the story.

Characters

MAIN CHARACTERS

DUAN LING 段岭: The crown prince of Southern Chen, Li Ruo (李若). Li Jianhong's only son and the heir to the Chen Empire.

LANG JUNXIA 郎俊侠: One of the Four Great Assassins. Also known as the Nameless Assassin and Wuluohou Mu (乌洛侯穆).

WU DU 武独: One of the Four Great Assassins. A poison master, who has fallen on hard times after the deaths of his first two masters, Zhao Kui and Li Jianhong.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

BORJIGIN BATU 布儿赤金拔都: A Mongolian boy, and one of Duan Ling's schoolmates in Shangjing, who returned to Yuan.

BORJIGIN KUCHI 布儿赤金奇赤: Batu's father who returned to Yuan with Batu.

BIAN LINGBAI 边令白: Commander of defense at Tong Pass.

CAI YAN 蔡闫: One of Duan Ling's former schoolmates in Shangjing. A boy of Khitan and Han descent.

CHANGLIU-JUN 昌流君: One of the Four Great Assassins. Heavily favored by Mu Kuangda.

CHANG PIN 长聘: Mu Kuangda's strategist.

DING ZHI 丁芝 ("ANGELICA"): One of the courtesans of Qionghua House.

DUAN XIAOWAN 段小婉: Duan Ling's mother, a commoner.

FEI HONGDE 费宏德: Chang Pin's shishu. An elderly Tangut advisor who lives in Bian Lingbai's manor at Tong Pass.

HAN BIN 韩滨: Tiger General who betrayed Li Jianhong at Jiangjun Ridge.

HAN WEIYONG 韩唯庸: The chief of the Liao Empire's Southern Court, and the sole Han minister. The Southern Court's capital of Zhongjing is under his jurisdiction.

ELDER HE 鹤老: Wu Du's shishu who is also adept in using poison.

HELAN JIE 贺兰羯: A dangerous assassin with an iron hook for a hand.

HELIAN BO 赫连博: One of Duan Ling's former schoolmates in Shangjing, a Tangut royal with a stutter.

HELIAN DA 赫连达: Helian Bo's uncle, the Grand Preceptor of Western Liang.

LI JIANHONG 李渐鸿: The late emperor of Southern Chen, posthumously known as Emperor Wulie. Duan Ling's father.

LI YANQIU 李衍秋: The emperor of Southern Chen. Duan Ling's fourth uncle.

MASTER KONGMING 空明法师: A bad-tempered old monk who presided over the Northern Temple. His sect once possessed the sword Ender of the Profane before it was stolen by his traitorous shidi.

MU JINZHI 牧锦之: Mu Kuangda’s younger sister and the empress of Southern Chen.

MU KUANGDA 牧旷达: The prime minister of Southern Chen.

MU QING 牧磬: Mu Kuangda’s son.

ÖGEDEI 窝阔台: A Mongolian general.

SHANG LEGUAN 赏乐官: Son of a high-ranking official in Western Liang.

WANLIFU 万里伏: An ancient Han swordsman from the White Tiger Sect of Xichuan who retrieved all the pieces of the nameless sword and reforged it into the Guardian of the Realm.

EMPRESS DOWAGER XIAO 萧太后: Acting regent for the Liao Empire.

XIE YOU 谢宥: The commander of the Black-Plated Army of Jiang Prefecture.

XUNCHUN 寻春: The madam and owner of Qionghua House in Shangjing. Wu Du’s shijie.

YAO FU 姚复: The Marquis of Huaiyin and a prince consort of Southern Chen. Princess Duanping’s husband.

YAO JING 姚静: Yao Zheng’s younger cousin sent to Tong Pass by the Marquis of Huaiyin for a marriage arrangement with Western Liang.

YAO ZHENG 姚筝: Commandery Princess Congping of Southern Chen, the daughter of Princess Duanping and the Marquis of Huaiyin.

YELÜ DASHI 耶律大石: The Great Prince of the Northern Court and the chief of the Liao Empire’s Northern Court. Killed defending Shangjing from the second Mongol invasion.

YELÜ ZONGZHEN 耶律宗真: The current child emperor of the Liao Empire. Empress Dowager Xiao rules in his stead.

ZHAO KUI 赵奎: Formerly the Grand General of Southern Chen. Killed by Changliu-jun.

ZHAO PU 赵埔: Zhao Rong’s father who was killed by pirates.

ZHAO RONG 赵融: Zhao Kui's nephew who had been captured and drowned by pirates.

ZHENG YAN 郑彦: One of the Four Great Assassins.

Name Guide

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning "big" or "elder," which can be added before titles for elders, like "dage" or "dajie," or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning "old." Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning "little" or "younger," which can be added before names or titles for juniors like "xiaodi." Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning "son" or "child." Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

Family

DI/DIDI: A word meaning "younger brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning "elder brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning "elder sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

TANGGE: A word meaning "elder paternal male cousin."

TANGJIE: A word meaning "elder paternal female cousin."

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

XIONGDI: A word meaning “brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIBO: The elder peer of one’s shifu. Equivalent to an uncle older than one’s parent.

SHIDI: A younger peer under the same master, equivalent to a younger brother.

SHIFU: One’s trade teacher or master.

SHIJIE: An elder peer under the same master, equivalent to an older sister.

SHIMEI: A younger peer under the same master, equivalent to a younger sister.

SHINIANG: One’s shifu’s wife.

SHISHU: The younger peer of one’s shifu. Equivalent to an uncle younger than one’s parent.

SHIXIONG: An elder peer under the same master, equivalent to an older brother.

SHIZHI: Disciple of one’s peer. Equivalent to one’s niece or nephew.

Other

GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

LAOYE: A title for the head of a household.

-QING: A term of familiar address from an emperor toward one of his ministers.

SHAOYE: Young master.

GLOSSARY

COURTYARD HOUSE (SIHEYUAN): Traditional Chinese architecture is centered around an open rectangular space, the courtyard, with multiple individual halls built on three sides. The more lavish the residence, the more courtyards and structures it will have. Mansions and palaces will contain many such courtyards, each with a different master or mistress.

A standard courtyard house has two courtyards: the outer courtyard and its associated halls meant for receiving guests, and a private inner courtyard and its associated halls that serve as living chambers. The private courtyard is always on the opposite side of the grounds from the entrance gate. Corridors run the outer perimeter of the yard, connecting the various halls, and may have seats installed in the railing. The courtyard itself may be simply paved or may contain gardens and walkways.

FOUR BOOKS AND FIVE CLASSICS: The canon of Confucian texts that became central to both primary education and the imperial examinations. The Four Books are: *The Analects*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Great Learning*, and *Mengzi*. The Five Classics are: *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Book of Changes (I-Ching)*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals.*

GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS: Geographical regions are informal, nonadministrative regions that refer to a specific area in relation to a major landmark, such as a river or a pass, and will usually have a cardinal direction as a suffix:

· dong: area east of the landmark

· xi: area west of the landmark

· nan: area south of the landmark

· bei: area north of the landmark

· zhong: central, or the area in between two major landmarks.

For example, Jiangnan, “south of the river,” refers to the region south of the Yangtze river, and Guanxi, “west of the pass,” refers to the region west of Tong Pass.

IMPERIAL STATE EXAM: The system of examinations in ancient China that qualified candidates to serve as officials in state bureaucracy. Achievements in civil service and scholarship brought the highest prestige for any citizen, regardless of background.

JIANGHU: A staple of wuxia and xianxia, the jianghu (**江湖** / “rivers and lakes”) describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

JOSS MONEY: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

LAWFUL AND COMMON-BORN RELATIONSHIPS: Upper-class men in ancient China often took multiple wives. Only one would be the official wife, and her lawful sons would take precedence over the common sons of the concubines. Sons of lawful birth were prioritized in matters of inheritance. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the common sons born to concubines or mistresses.

LUNAR CALENDAR AND ASSOCIATED HOLIDAYS: For most of Chinese history, years were divided into twelve lunar months of twenty-nine to thirty days, and certain festivals were held when the number of the day and the month matched. Examples include:

FIRST DAY OF THE FIRST MONTH: New Year’s Day.

THIRD DAY OF THE THIRD MONTH: Double Third, or the Shangsi Festival, is Maiden’s Day, a day to celebrate a girl’s coming of age.

FIFTH DAY OF THE FIFTH MONTH: Duanwu, commonly known as the Dragon Boat Festival, is a folk festival to ward off the evil that causes sickness and plagues. It also commemorates Qu Yuan, a patriotic poet who drowned himself in grief over the state of his nation.

SEVENTH DAY OF THE SEVENTH MONTH: Qixi is known as the Crafter's Festival, a celebration of deft hands. Legend has it that a celestial maiden, the weaver girl, came to earth and married a cowherd. Despite wanting to stay on earth with him and their children, she was forced to return to heaven by her father, the Jade Emperor. The cowherd tried to follow her on an oxcart but was stopped at the Milky Way, a silver river cutting through the sky that separated the two lovers. On a single day of the year, Qixi, magpies swarm together and create a bridge that allows the cowherd and the weaver to reunite. Thus, Qixi is also known as a celebration of romantic love.

MEMORIAL TO THE THRONE: A carefully crafted essay presenting an issue to communicate to the emperor. Depending on the circumstances, it was sometimes directed toward certain officials as well.

QI AND ACUPOINTS IN MARTIAL ARTS: Qi is a vital force that courses through the body in channels known as meridians. Acupoints are specific spots on these meridians that are said to stimulate the central nervous system in characteristic ways. A martial artist cultivates the qi in their body and manipulates it as a form of energy, either to boost themselves internally or expel it as a form of attack.

QINGGONG: Literally "lightness technique," qinggong (**轻功**) refers to the martial arts skill of moving swiftly and lightly from one point to another, often so nimbly it looks like one is flying through the air. In wuxia and xianxia settings, characters use qinggong to leap great distances and heights.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: A holistic system of medicine used throughout most of Chinese history. Herbal remedies were boiled into decoctions or ground and applied as a poultice to treat injuries.

About the Author

Fei Tian Ye Xiang (Arise Zhang) is a Chinese novelist who has been active since 2008. A romantic who crafts fantasy worlds suffused with eastern mythology, he has published a number of books in places such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Germany. Many of his works, including *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records*, have received manhua and popular animated adaptations. He considers writing to be the act of bringing boundless adventure to the mundane life of the real world, allowing his readers to follow his characters in exploring the endless possibilities of time and space. He hopes every world will leave his readers with everlasting memories.

Footnotes

Chapter 41

[1] A verse from “Spring Evening Banquet with My Brothers at the Peach Garden” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Chapter 44

[2] The junior generational peer of one’s master within a school of martial arts or tutelage.

[3] An address for one’s teacher or master.

Chapter 47

[4] A title for the head of a household.

Chapter 48

[5] A title for one’s older female peer who shares the same master.

[6] The opening of The Analects by Confucius, Book 1.

[7] The opening of Great Learning, attributed to Zengzi.

[8] First two lines of “Beauty Yu,” a poem written by Li Yu, the last ruler of the Southern Tang dynasty, reminiscing on the fall of his kingdom.

[9] Famous lines from “Bring in the Wine” by renowned Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

[10] The opening lines of the untitled first poem in the anonymous collection Nineteen Old Poems, wherein a woman laments her separation from her husband.

[11] An essay prompt format for exams that used partial quotes, or that combined parts of two or more passages, in order to make the exam more difficult.

Chapter 50

[12] Excerpt from Mengzi, in the first chapter on Gongsun Chou.

Chapter 51

[13] An encyclopedia of plants, animals, and minerals believed to have medicinal properties, compiled in the Ming dynasty.

Chapter 52

[14] Calligraphy in the style of Yan Zhenqing, known for its strength and boldness, emphasizing the stability of the writing.

Chapter 58

[15] From “A Night on Jiande River” by Tang dynasty poet Meng Haoran.

Chapter 65

[16] An address for the disciple of a peer who also studied under one’s master. A peer’s disciple is similar to a niece or nephew within a sect or school.

[17] From Chapter 1 of The Book of Burial by Guo Pu, from the Eastern Jin dynasty.

Chapter 67

[18] An address for one’s elder paternal female cousin.

Chapter 70

[19] From “To the Recluse Wei Ba” by Tang dynasty poet Du Fu.

Chapter 73

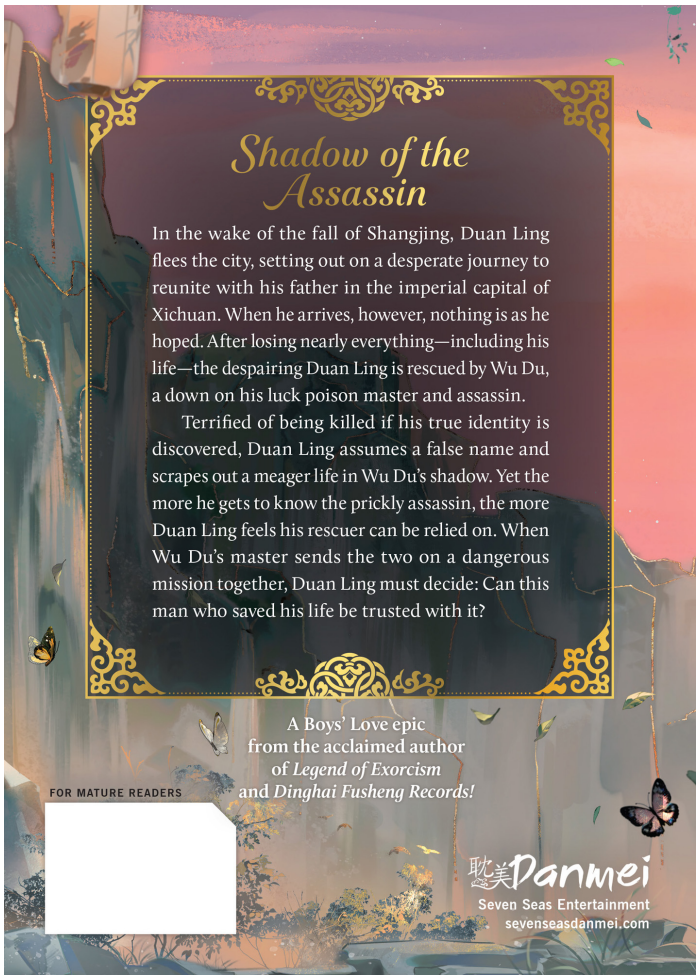
[20] First two lines of “The Moon over the Mountain Pass” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Chapter 75

[21] Lines from “Hillside Sheep: Reminiscing at Tong Pass” by Yuan dynasty poet Zhang Yanghao.

Chapter 77

[22] Lines from “Spring Evening Banquet with My Brothers at the Peach Garden” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.


Shadow of the Assassin
In the wake of the fall of Shangjing, Duan Ling flees the city, setting out on a desperate journey to reunite with his father in the imperial capital of Xichuan. When he arrives, however, nothing is as he hoped. After losing nearly everything—including his life—the despairing Duan Ling is rescued by Wu Du, a down on his luck poison master and assassin.
Terrified of being killed if his true identity is discovered, Duan Ling assumes a false name and scrapes out a meager life in Wu Du's shadow. Yet the more he gets to know the prickly assassin, the more Duan Ling feels his rescuer can be relied on. When Wu Du's master sends the two on a dangerous mission together, Duan Ling must decide: Can this man who saved his life be trusted with it?
A Boys' Love epic
from the acclaimed author
of Legend of Exorcism
and Dinghai Fusheng Records!
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